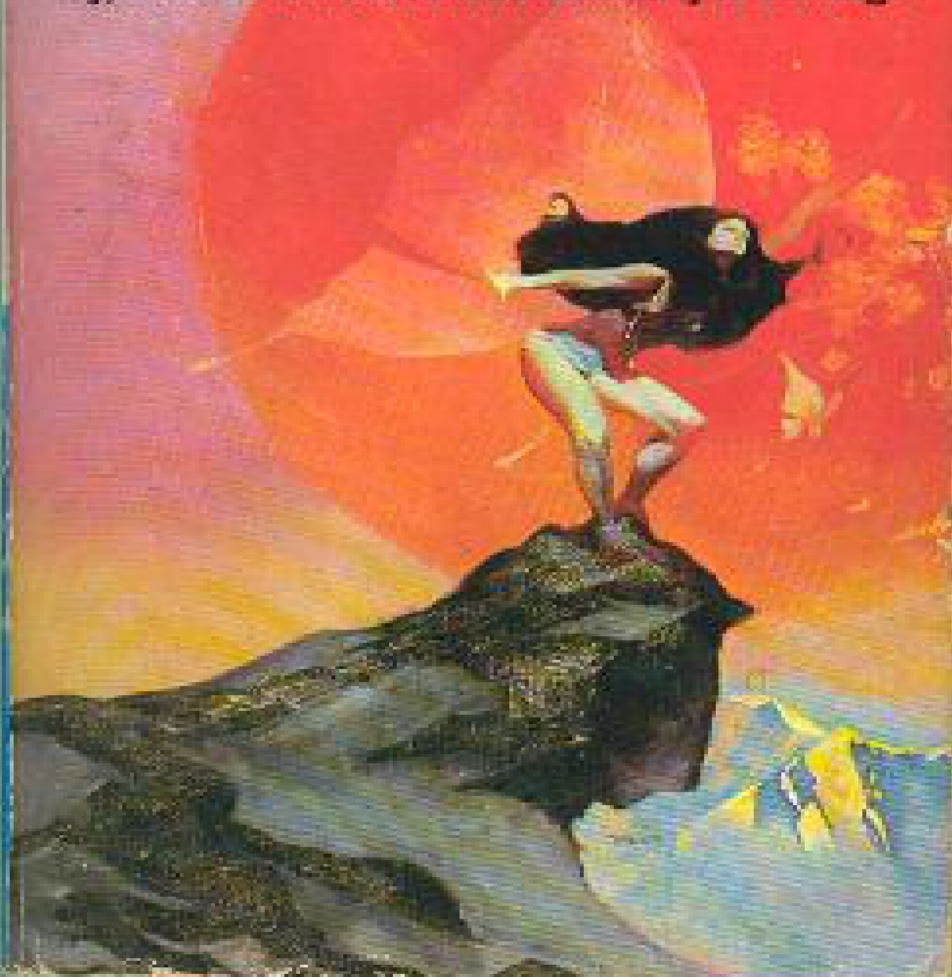


ace  
double  
LARRY FOR

DEAN R. KOONTZ

# DARK OF THE WOODS

Fly, natives—for victorious humanity is coming!



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# **DARK OF THE WOODS by Dean R. Koontz**





# *Chapter One*

The first bit of trouble came even as they were leaving the starship on Demos's port field; it was a harbinger of worse times ahead.

Stauffer Davis walked down the corrugated ramp with his protection robot, Proteus, at his side. After a tedious flight out from the Alliance central worlds, he was so on edge that the gurgling of plasti-plasma with the robot's spherical, force-capped body ground hard on his nerves and made him somewhat nauseous. Proteus was ignorant of his master's irritation, for every ounce of his being, every drop of his quasi-liquid circuitry was concentrated on maintaining an optimum efficiency watch to detect even the slightest minim of hostile life before it could do damage to his human charge. As he floated on his grav plates, his tiny sensor nodes gleamed in the bright sun—some of them alive with color that radiated from within: amber, crimson, and a soft, pulsing blue. His two chief sight receptors were cataracted white screens—but as watchful as eyes could ever be.

When they were halfway to the minibus that would carry them to the main port terminal, a spiderbat swept low from the east, wings fluffed, claws extended to rip open Davis's scalp...

Inside Proteus, the card taped index of this planet held the information that the spiderbat was a particularly vicious little predator that had been known to go for a three-horned buffalo when it only wanted a snack, leaving better than 99% of the corpse for the eaters-of-dead-meat. Its wingspread was but eleven inches of leathery membrane; its weight seldom more than two pounds. The only things it had going for it—aside from its maniacal determination and total lack of fear—were its teeth and its long brittle claws which it honed constantly on the limestone outcroppings of its native foothills. The claws could gut a man in moments.

Proteus snapped alert, the force-cap over his main manipulation barrel dissolving as he turned to take aim. A tentacle of plasti-plasma shot out of the casing, wrapped around the spiderbat and throttled it in a shapeless hand of warm goo. Proteus dropped the body on the concrete where it wriggled a moment and was, finally, utterly still and dead.

Later, Davis could not remember whether he heard the wings of the second beast or whether it had called in sympathy to the last spasm of its dying mate. But something registered as ominous... He moved swiftly, fell to his knees and rolled sideways, his hands flung over his head to ward off the second spiderbat. It was always wise to remember that the gods who had made other worlds were the same gods who had made Earth and that one of their prime rules was that all things traveled in pairs...

Fortunately, Proteus had not forgotten.

The dead bat's mate aborted its dive and skidded across the hard port floor. It came for Davis, wings flapping, claws rattling against concrete, eyes bright with rabid madness. It got within six feet of him before Proteus snapped it up and mangled it. He dropped the thing beside the body of its mate.

They boarded the bus.

At the terminal building, the minibus drew to a halt before a small cluster of people who were holding up a banner which declared: WELCOME, STAUFFER DAVIS. He sighed, looked to Proteus and wished that the robot could understand, could listen and discuss and do more than protect. He would have liked to tell Proteus something then: that fans of historical novels made him want to retch.

They were the last off the bus, the robot floating ahead, his microminiaturized brain weeding the bad from the good and destroying the former. If the world were as black and white for men, Davis thought, things would be a damn sight easier. The insects the machine killed seemed harmless enough, and he decided he might not have properly taped the card indices of Demos's flora and fauna into the thing's memory banks. Proteus's retention cells had experienced hundreds of recordings, erasures, and rerecordings and needed an entire new set of spook. That could be taken care of when they returned to the central worlds; for the present, Davis knew he would have to take the first opportunity to rerelease his mechanical compatriot to the planet and hope that would be sufficient.

"Mr. Davis!" a curly haired, cowish woman gasped, shuffling out of the knot of bookworms. She offered him her white-gloved hand.

He wondered how long it would be necessary to endure their little tribute. Damn, he was tired! "This is flattering," he managed to say with a smile, though he thought it amazing they could not seem to tell that his teeth were *gritted*.

Proteus finally decided that the white-gloved woman's live beetle brooch could prove a danger. He flashed a pseudopod out and crushed it against her pink lapel.

"He's apparently not correctly carded to Demos," Davis said, barely able to suppress his laughter at the dripping mess.

She reached to wipe the bloody splotch from her suit and merely succeeded in smearing her glove as well. "A harmless beetle," she said. "There's very little that is harmful on Demos, Mr. Davis. Demos is the next thing to Paradise."

Wasn't the next thing to Paradise—Purgatory? Yes, perhaps this had been a paradise before the Alliance arrived, coating the plains with concrete to berth their giant ships. And it wouldn't have been so bad if only the landscape

had been destroyed—but they had obliterated Demos's people as well. Such a small population, the winged people, yet the Alliance had killed rather than make concessions. The Demosians, after all, had been so insolent as to offer resistance to the Alliance's annexation of their world. So the Alliance had shut them up. Permanently... The motto of every ruthless government: Never go around, go over. And, of course, these winged people had been aliens—which word could be translated as "animals" as far as Alliance government was concerned. Forget that the Demosians were intelligent with a culture and heritage that was rich and ancient. To the Alliance, that was irrelevant. The provincial policy-making board of the Earth-centered government considered all alien lifeforms inferior to mankind. Therefore, if an alien was less than a human, he did not require humane treatment. The logic of megalomaniacs; but such were the types in power. The Supremacy of Man coalition still ruled the Alliance as the major party, and they understood only the voice of the gun. Did this dumpy, self-important woman not understand that his next novel would have to be about the slaughter that took place here, about a hundred and seventy million winged men and women who had been murdered in the Alliance's colonization of Demos, with condemning details on the sterilizing effects of the mutant mustard gas that had eventually spelled GENOCIDE in dark letters across the face of an entire race? *Paradise...*

She interrupted his reverie to request that he address their book club before leaving Demos. That he sign a handful, just a few, not many mind you—will take only a moment—of his first editions which they had brought with them...

"There's really little need for one of those here," the Alliance representative said, motioning toward the bobbling form of Proteus as Davis slouched into a seat before the heavy metal desk.

"He killed a spiderbat just after we got off the ship."

"Oh, most of those have been exterminated. They're rare anymore."

"It only takes one."

The rep frowned.

"I believe you'll be pleased to know you'll be living right in one of the aviaries. It was used by a research team, sociologists, a few years back and is all decked out for human habitation. Working right in there, you'll be better able to get an idea of how they lived." The last three words were said with an undertone of disgust, as if the winged people had been unimaginably barbaric.

"The Sanctuary is only a mile and a half from where you'll be staying," the rep continued, pulling at the corners of his mustache with his thin, nervous hands, as if he thought the ordering of that patch of brush would bring a corresponding order to his thoughts. "They'll supply you with food and provisions."



"Sanctuary?" Davis asked.

"Where they keep the last of the winged people."

"Keep them?"

"Yes. Until they—well, die." The rep looked uncomfortable and did not meet Davis's gaze. "We have a car waiting to take you up there right now. If you'll just follow me... your luggage has been collected and loaded already."

They left the office by a rear door, walked a long, bleak corridor, through a metal firedoor and into the pleasant breeze of the early autumn afternoon. The fresh air was a welcome relief from the sterile, chilly air-conditioned tomb of the Alliance headquarters. A sleek, black grav car rested on its rubber cushion before them, its doors open like gaping mouths.

"By the way," the rep said, fidgeting a bit, "the wife wondered if you might—Well, I have a first edition of this book here, *Lilian Girl* and..."

Davis autographed the book, climbed inside the car, waited for Proteus to enter through the other side, then cycled the doors shut with the proper toggle on the console. All the while, the Alliance man stood by, uncertain if they were parting on friendly or antagonistic terms. Since Davis was supposed to be writing a pro-Alliance novel, he wanted to be as gracious as possible. Pro-Alliance novelists were rare in the creative community. When the book appeared, Davis thought, the little bureaucrat would hate himself for being so gracious now. They'd send Davis a bill, surely, for all the cooperation they were offering freely now. But it was essential to delude them into believing his book was going to take a favorable view of genocide in order to get into the preserves of the winged people and do first-hand research on their architecture and probable lifestyle. He punched to put the car on its own recognizance, leaned back, and relaxed as the car lifted off the ground and purred away from the port city, away from the rep and the square, gray building of Alliance headquarters.

The big robo-car eventually left the concrete nothingness of the port and pulled onto a badly paved road which required the grav plate distance compensators to work overtime. They twisted through rolling hills and green-blue grass. Once, a carnivorous bird, much less menacing than the spiderbats, dove at the windscreen. Proteus flung out a psuedopod, slapped it against the glass before he realized Davis was already shielded. He retracted the plasti-plasma and brooded quietly the rest of the way.

Davis sincerely hoped he would not have to listen to yet another Alliance employee tell him that Demos was safe and heavenly. Was their reassurance about this "paradise" simply a psychological tool to help them justify the extermination of the native Demosians?

The car broke through into sparsely treed foothills and confronted the first

of the Demosian houses. The dark stones seemed fitted together without benefit of mortar, jutting to form a ninety foot tower, fifty feet in diameter. There were several round "doors" on the ground and at seemingly random intervals up the sides. Winged people would be entering, after all, while in flight. Davis turned to stare after the marvelous structure as their car fled onward.

At the thirty-sixth tower, the car pulled onto a dirt track and stopped, flung its doors open as the grav plates shut down and the body settled onto its rubber rim. Proteus was the first out, nervously patrolling the immediate area.

But there was nothing for him to kill.

Davis carried the first of the bags inside, Proteus still in the lead. The exterior of the place had been interesting—but the interior was stunning. The core of the building, which they had reached through a wide passage leading from the entrance, shot directly to the open-beam ceiling ninety feet above. Leading from this small core were portholes to rooms around the "rim" of the tube-within-a-tube structure. The architecture was one of bold sweeps and graceful curves, denying the ancient facade: the lines of men unbound by gravity, spoiled only by a set of rickety homemade stairs. He decided these must have been added by the sociological research team the rep had informed him of. What possible reason would winged men have had for stairs... ?

When he had all of his luggage unloaded, he investigated the alien chambers. There were recreation rooms with gameboards pegged to the walls. He took down a few of these, well aware that he would have to decipher their rules in order to include them in his book. Other chambers were Demosian equivalents of kitchens, baths, lounges, and libraries. The bedrooms were hung with lavish tapestries and handwoven grass nets whose fibers formed pictures in the manner of embroidery; the beds were too low and wide, the mattresses thick and a bit too soft by human standards.

When he had explored only half of the forty rooms, he recorded his first impressions on his tapewriter in order not to forget the initial awe that possessed him at the start of this project. He also felt a heavy, restful air of peace, as if no harm could ever come to him in a place built by those long-dead people. Later, he tried all the kitchen devices, found them in working order as the rep had promised. There was apparently a grav plate stress generator somewhere in the building, tucked away where the sight of it would not destroy the naturalness of the house. The only thing missing was food.

Until *she* came...

He had flopped on the bed to ponder the scene, his mind ablaze with images of alien art and structure. Her voice came on the hollow echo of the still, late afternoon air. At first, he thought it was a dream voice, for he hung on the edge of sleep. Then he realized it was calling his name. He pushed off the bed and went to the inner portal, stared down the well of the central core.

She was about to call him again, then saw him out of the corner of her eye and looked up...

He realized, as if he had stepped outside of his body and looked back at himself, that his mouth was hanging open rather stupidly. Yet he could not summon the willpower to close it.

Her ebony mane of hair spread about her cherubic face, which was further highlighted by the pitch of her eyes, the cunningly crafted sweep of her graceful neck. The hair curled down her light toga garment and encircled her small breasts.

"I brought food," she said, holding up a paper bag and a thermos. "From the Keepers at the Sanctuary. Shall I bring it up?"

"Yes," he said, finally able to move his mouth and speak.

She took three small steps on her toes as if beginning a ballet twirl, and she was airborne, rising toward him on soft blue wings. Amber light filtered through the membrane, softened into violet, and made each panel of the thin flesh into a flower petal glued between the fine struts of cartilage. There was a heavy flapping noise as the membranes folded, spread, folded—and she stood before him on the platform. She offered the food and thermos.

Proteus hummed beside him, gurgling frantically as he searched his flora and fauna banks to be certain she was not of a deadly species. Davis was glad he had taken time to rerelease the robot to Demos on the drive up from the port. Otherwise, the machine might already have disposed of her in a most unpleasant manner.

"That's just for tonight," she said. "Matron Salsbury will send me in a grav car with provisions for a week. Tomorrow morning, if that suits you."

"Yes, fine." He stared a moment, unable to avert his eyes from her, then said, "Will you join me?"

"No thank you. I've eaten, Mr. Davis." She smiled, amused by his confusion.

"Stauffer."

She frowned. "I don't know that name, though I had thought I had mastered your language quite well."

"You have. It's not a real first name, but a family name. A sadistic mother who was sorry she ever married my father. She managed to saddle me with her bitterness by labeling me with her maiden name."

"Your people don't sound happy."

"They're dead anyway," he said. "And don't look sorry about *that!*"

They stood, eyes dark to dark in the amber light, her wings drawn back and folded like velvet cloth so that they almost ceased to exist. "Well," she said, "I have to go."

Impulsively, he said, "I'm unfamiliar with Demos. Would you ask Matron Salsbury if you might be my guide for a few days—until I become acquainted?"

She hesitated. "I'll ask. But now I have to go, or shell be angry." She turned, stepped into the air, fluffed her wings and drifted down. Moments later, she was gone from the core, even the distant sound of her wings faded altogether.

Removed from her bewitching presence, his common sense returned like a tidal wave crashing across the beach of his mind, and he cursed himself for his stupidity. Certainly she attracted him, for she was undeniably beautiful. But he should never have made his interest so evident. To imagine her as his lover (as he had been doing) was sheer madness—sheer, deadly, stupid madness. The Supremacy of Man coalition had designed and enforced the strictest imaginable miscegenation laws; Earthmen who loved those of other races were made impotent, and the minimum prison sentence was twelve years. Once in prison, there would be little chance of eventual freedom, even if he were given the minimum sentence.

The Supremacy-hired, Supremacy-sympathizing guards would see to that with a joyous, savage brutality...

He could not allow himself such dangerous dreams. It was a silly thing for any man to think of, let alone a man with so much to lose as he.

He must consider her only a friend. How could affection have arisen so swiftly anyway? He surely wasn't going to try to argue love-at-first-sight, was he? It could only be lust he felt. And lust could be conquered. He would think of her only as a friend, and he would not allow himself to love her. He hoped...

Later that night, there were dreams:

*"Love in its essence is spiritual fire": Swendenborg...*

*Stauffer Davis tossed through flames. They licked at him but did not consume him. Instead, they exhilarated, shot his flesh through with a contained burning that flowered in him with glowing ash and phoenixed his ancient soul...*

*"The only victory over love is flight": Napoleon...*

*But he didn't mean—Oh, well, a Freudian quote. Davis FLEW in his illicit dreams. Still, there were flames all about, all-deep, all-high, all-wide and full. And he flew through them, dancing on the hot air, flying beside her...*

*"Oh my love's like a dark-haired rose": Burns and Stauffer Davis...*

*He flew through the flames beside her, tangling their wings, singing love songs in the crackling air...*

*But everything abruptly mutated into nightmare. The flames suddenly stung. His wings caught fire, flashed white. He saw hers catch too...*

*He saw her falling...*

*And he was falling beside her—down to where thousands of winged men and women waited accusingly. They knew he was not one of them. And standing on the horizon were Supremacy guards with scalpels of steel and diagrams for impotency...*

*He woke screaming.*

*Proteus hit the lights, plasti-plasma slopping about in his silvered husk, and restlessly searched the room.*

*There was nothing, only the ghosts of a thousand winged men and women etched in the ether from another day long gone.*

*Davis sat on the edge of the bed, head cradled in his hands, thinking of the stupidity of allowing this silly infatuation to grow into something more serious. Impotency under Supremacy surgeons' hands... imprisonment... almost certain death...*

*But none of these ugly possibilities seemed able to drive out the picture of her ebony hair or the perfect geometrical design of her wings which had been imprinted on the soft gray flesh of his brain. God damn it, he thought. I'm not making the artist's error of falling in love with the symbol of my sympathies, am I?*

*Infatuation. Nothing more. Please.*

*Proteus roamed the far corners of the room, searching...*



## *Chapter Two*

During the following two days, Davis's position became even more difficult, for he found that the girl, Leah, was more than a beautiful form and a finely sculptured face. She also possessed a sharp wit and a deep well of inquisitive intelligence that was a delight to feed with more and more knowledge. She had educated herself in the ways and culture of her conquerors, and she could debate cleverly and at length on almost any topic Davis chose. He began to strengthen the emotional interest he held in her instead of whittling at the strands that drew him to her. That first moment he had seen her, he had been spellbound. Now he was enchanted.

At night, lying on the bed that was too large and too soft and too low, he would force himself to remember the punishment for miscegenation. They could insure that he felt no sexual interest in anyone ever again, let alone an alien woman. They could imprison and torture him. They could kill him...

But every morning, when Leah returned, he seemed to forget the vows of the previous night. He could not dismiss her, for he was too fascinated by her. He purposefully acted lost in many cases, only to insure that she would not feel it was time for him to find his own way about.

On the third day of her work as a guide, the bond was struck—at first in his mind alone, later between them and in the open. On the third day, he became a criminal by Alliance law. It started with the rat and culminated in the temple.

*The rat...*

He asked her, that morning, if there were shelters which the winged people had constructed as proof against the heavy clouds of mustard gas that had been flushed through their cities by the Alliance troops. He knew the stuff rotted rubber and that gas masks would have proven relatively useless after more than two uses.

"There's one half a mile up the lane," she said. "We can get there in a couple of minutes, except it's mostly demolished."

"Is there one intact nearby?"

"There aren't any intact anywhere," she said. "The conquerors found them, one at a time, and destroyed them."

He had stopped wincing at references to the brutality of the war. She did not make them to embarrass him, but as mere statements of fact. Indeed, he thought she did not even consciously connect the Earthmen civilians who had settled here after the war with the armor-suited power soldiers of the great conflict. "Well, then I guess that has to do."

He slung his typewriter over his shoulder, and they walked to enjoy the warmth and the crispness of the morning. On both sides of them, there was an occasional scurry as a woodland animal rushed for a tree or burrow. He remembered having read descriptions of the Demosian city sites immediately after the Alliance troops had landed. They had described the vast numbers of dead birds and animals that had succumbed to the mustard gas, tens of thousands of them, lying so thickly that they concealed the earth itself for long stretches.

"There's the shelter," she said. "What is left of it, at least."

He followed the direction of her slim, tan hand and saw great slabs of concrete thrusting out of the earth, lengths of rusted and twisted steel that punched at the sky as if to rip it open and bring it down. The earth around the debris was charred black and in a few places fused into darkly gleaming glass by the heat of the explosion that had ripped through the underground structure. As they drew closer, he could see pieces of furniture, metal benches, and leather couches all broken, shattered, melted, mashed in among the cross-work of beams and concrete. In the crook of a steel beam, wedged in the tight angle, was a Demosian skull: fragile, tending toward a slight lengthiness, with the oval eye sockets that would accommodate the lovely orbs of a girl like Leah. In a pocket of rubble only a few feet away, as if giving balance to the scene, was a field mouse's nest. The thing hunched in the mass of weeds and grass and string, its two babies in its belly pouch, looking at them with more curiosity than fear. Death and life, side by side.

"You couldn't have had traitors," he said. "I know that much about the Demosians. They never gave information—even under torture. How did the Alliance know where to drop bombs?"

"They didn't," she said. "The explosion, you see, came from within the shelter, blasting outward, rather than down and in. The conquerors had a thing we think they called the 'mole.' They dropped them by the hundreds, maybe thousands."

"Yes," he said. "I remember now. The things were only as large as a man's arm, packed full of superexplosives. They hit the ground, bored down thirty feet, then leveled out and acted like subterranean submarines, seeking out heat with very sensitive receptors. Drop enough in one area, and sooner or later, one of them is going to hit paydirt. Then it bores through the wall of the shelter and detonates itself."

The field mouse made a chittering noise at them, but didn't bother running.

Davis clambered into the rubble, stopping here and there to look down the spaces between the fused debris. There was a soft light welling up from somewhere very far below, and it illuminated a ragged but possible sloping corridor. "It looks," he said, as Leah came to his shoulder and looked downward with him, "as if the generators have never run out."



"It hasn't been too many years," she said.

"The rubble looks fused the whole way down. There shouldn't be any slides. I'm going to try to pry my way in there."

"It's packed too tightly," she said, looking over the expanse of mangled construction materials. "You won't find a way."

"I'll make a way," he said, grinning. "Proteus!"

The robot floated quickly to his side, main manipulator barrel unstopped, sensors flashing excitedly.

"Gun left."

Proteus slid a barrel from his smooth, seamless belly, turned left.

"Ground level," Davis ordered.

The angle of the barrel dropped until it was pointing at the melted beams and concrete hillocks.

"Fire one!"

Proteus shot a small, explosive rocket, large enough to blast a hole through any animal as large as a horse. It struck the ruins five yards away as Davis and Leah stopped behind a slab of concrete. There was an almost instantaneous explosion that shook the entire crust of ruin, and a section of the floor they stood on gave way and crashed down into the open spaces beneath. For a long moment, the sound of things rebounding from the walls and outcroppings of the regions below echoed up to them, a mournful noise. When the quiet returned, Davis ventured forth and carefully inspected the entrance Proteus had made, found that the crust immediately around the hole was still solid and trustworthy.

"I'll try not to be long," he said.

"I'm going with you," she protested, pouting her face.

"I've got Proteus. That's one of the burdens as well as blessings of having a robot guardian. He goes with you whether you want him to or not."

"I'm going with you," she repeated.

He saw the determination in her face, the tightening of the muscles along her jawline, and he knew there was no sense arguing. "The way's going to be a little tough, and there isn't room to spread your wings and fly if you should fall. But if you're still all that set on going—"

"I am."

The way was not as rugged as he had thought. His perspective, peering through the jumbled rubble earlier, had made the slanted corridor below look longer than it was. In ten minutes, they were in what had been the bottom floor of the shelter, a three-level affair. Here, the Demosians in hiding from the Alliance gases had not been killed by the force of the explosion itself, but by the firestorm which it had engendered. The bodies of about two hundred winged men and women and children laid about the room, mostly against the walls where they had been caught and suffocated so swiftly that they had not had a chance to move. The suction of the explosion and the intense heat must have snatched the air from their lungs in one instant and replaced it with flames the next. At least, he thought, it had been a swift end. There was nothing now but bones, a few skeletal masts of cartilage that had once been the bearers of membranous wings. And four hundred eye sockets, oval eye sockets, staring accusingly...

Proteus soared the length of the chamber, certain that there must be an adversary in such an uncommon place. When he reached the far corners of the room, forty yards away, the rat overhead screeched its battle cry, spraying spittle down onto Davis's head...

He looked up, saw red eyes as large as quarters.

The rat leaped, striking Leah's shoulder and sinking tiny, razorlike claws through her toga.

To the modern Alliance man, the ability to commit violence, against either another man or an animal, was something distasteful, barbaric, something that only an Alliance soldier had. And since most Alliance soldiers were power soldiers, robotic devices, machines, and cybernetic systems, there were relatively few men capable of violence in the entire system of settled worlds. The Proteus robots had, after all, all but negated the necessity to know how to defend yourself.

This atrophy of the violent ability very nearly meant the winged girl's death, for Davis found himself staring with fascination at the rat which scabbled at her, tore her toga as it tried to sink claws into her flesh and gain a purchase from which it could bring its wicked, yellowish teeth into play as well. It was as if he were in a dream, moving through syrup or suddenly turned to stone just when it was essential that he act most swiftly. Then, fleeing across the back of his eyes like a specter across a moor was a vision of Leah with her face chewed up, an eye torn loose by the vicious fingers of the ratlike thing. In a moment, the antiviolence tendencies which had been nurtured through his entire life evaporated and were replaced by a manic and uncontrollable rage.

Had he looked over his shoulder, he would have seen that Proteus was rapidly returning to do battle, but he did not even think of that. He reached out and seized the animal by the back of the neck, tore it loose from her. He saw blood on its claws, matted in the thick fur of its paws. Her toga was stained

crimson where it had had hold of her. Screaming, not aware that he was and wondering who was making that ungodly noise, he grabbed the head of the rat with his other hand and simultaneously attempted to crush its skull and strangle it.

It wriggled loose and leaped at his chest where it gouged its nails into him, struck upwards toward his neck with its deadly teeth...

He grabbed its head again, pulled it away from him just in time, though it still held onto him with its rear feet, claws dug deeply into his flesh. He wrenched at it, ruthlessly unconcerned about what such an action would do to his chest, ripped it loose, turned, and slammed it into the wall. It screamed, wiggled and kicked to get free again. But he clenched it tightly, ignoring the dozens of scratches it inflicted on his hands. He slammed it again, again, twice more until its back was broken, its spine shattered. Its blood ran down his fingers and dripped onto the floor.

He was no longer screaming, but he found himself making heavy, rasping breathing sounds as air rushed raggedly in and out of his lungs. And he was whimpering, deep inside, like a child. And he was squeezing the lifeless rat as if he would squash it beyond recognition, would compress its very bones into powder...

He looked up at Leah, who seemed not to notice the slight wound on her own shoulder. She stared wide-eyed at him. He wondered if she realized what had happened, understood the depth of his actions in these last few minutes. He had risked his own life to save hers, had broken the conditioning of his social training and had resorted to violence. He had not even thought to wait for Proteus, to summon the machine to the task, for her life had been too precious to endanger for even the briefest of moments. In that first instant when he had seen her blood, he had ceased to think in terms of "you" and "me" but, instead, in the sense of "us." Her blood suddenly seemed as valuable as his own, and he had acted swiftly, insanely, without hesitation to protect this new extension of himself. Which meant it was not lust, as he had been working so hard to convince himself.

He dropped the rat.

He tried to say something, anything.

He choked and fell forward into unconsciousness...

Later, when she had finished using his speedheal ointments and bandages on their wounds and they had eaten alight lunch she prepared in the kitchen of the aviary where he was living, she leaned her elbows on the table, smiled at him, and said, "Can we go someplace special now, like I've been wanting? It will make the day seem a little happier after all the ugly things that have happened."

He did not much feel like pursuing the research plan he had outlined for the day. His nerves still trembled from memory of the rat squirming and screeching within his hands, striking for his throat. And his mind was plagued with the realization that things had gone too far with Leah, entirely too far. They would have to be brought to an end before the silent attachment he felt for her—and, he thought, she felt for him—was brought into the open and made turning back impossible.

"Where do you want to take me?" he asked.

"To the temple."

"Temple?"

"You'll see."

And when he got into the grav car to make the drive, she said, "Oh, I so wish you could fly."

"So do I, Leah," he said, pulling the car into the drifting leaves that settled from the yellow trees onto the rough, black road. "So do I."

The car hummed down the tree-shrouded lane.

Proteus sat in back, inches above the seat, bored—if such an emotion were possible for a plasti-plasma robot.

Davis knew the temple when they came in sight of it. Twin hills peaked breastlike against the backdrop of yellow mountains, and each was adorned with a giant structure. On the first hill there was a building composed of nine huge towers all joined in the middle to form a giant central chamber. Great teardrop entry portals split the gray-brown stone here and there. This was the temple. On the other breast, perched like a rakish nipple, lay the Sanctuary, a manmade block of ugly cement. Behind both, creeping close to them, were the terribly dense forests of the yellow mountains, the great, broad-leafed yil trees.

They stopped the car before the temple and waited until it settled onto its rubber rim, then got out.

Above the Sanctuary on the other hill several hundred yards away, half a dozen female angels floated on the breezes of autumn. The cool air carried their tinkling laughter to Davis and Leah: bells, Chinese wind chimes, water trickling into a jug.

One of the angels flew at the thick trees, her wings dazzling with refracted sunlight. She turned fifty yards from the edge of the woods and flew back to the others who giggled and squealed with delight.

Fascinated, Davis stood by Leah, watching them.

Another of the Demosian beauties swept away from the group and moved to within ten feet of the forest, hung there an instant, came back to the others like a triumphant child who has walked a dark alley without collapsing of fright.

The girls cheered.

A third soared to the challenge, crossed over the trees and hovered over them, dipped and swayed just over the tops of the branches and the brilliant yellow leaves. She came back slowly, proudly. As she approached them, the other five cherubs went wild with excited chattering and squeals of laughter.

"What are they doing?" he asked Leah at last, unconsciously taking her tiny hand in one of his giant, callused mitts and effectively swallowing it with his own hard flesh.

"The legends say the woods are haunted. The girls are playing a game that is centuries old: Daring the Demons of the Woods."

"You believe in spirits?"

"Not really." She watched the girls a moment. "It just helps to pass the time anymore."

"Then how did something like this get started?"

Her hand was a hot ball of flesh in his fist.

"The woods are a great danger, for one thing."

"Why?"

"We cannot fly in there. The trees are so thick that their branches restrict flight. If we should be chased by a wolf or some other fierce creature of the mountains, we wouldn't have a chance. We're too delicate for running much of a distance. Flight is our only escape, and the trees would deny us that. So we stay out of the woods. Time, then, builds up legends of demons. We are as superstitious a people, in some ways, as you men of Earth."

Davis smiled. "Fascinating! It has to go into the book."

They watched the game.

"Will I be in your book?" she asked at last.

"But of course! I think you'll even be the heroine."

She laughed and wiggled her hand in his.

He drew her closer, not taking time to think that the gesture was exactly the one he should be avoiding at all costs. "Shall we look at the temple?"

"Yes!" she said enthusiastically. "You'll want that in your book too."

They entered at the base of one of the immense towers and walked through stone corridors into the huge central chamber where the nine towers met. The bare floor, cobbled in crimson and pitch, stretched some hundred feet to a granite slab framed by stone candlesticks as tall as a tall man. Behind this altar was an enormous face which composed an entire wall of the church, stretching 120 feet overhead, 90 feet from ear to ear. The vacant black eyes were 30 feet across, 16 feet high. The nose was an elongated boulder punctuated by nostrils that were really caverns almost large enough to drive a grav car into. The full-lipped mouth was carved in loving detail, the broad teeth showing grayly in a benevolent smile.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The Face of God," she said. "Come on. Let's go inside."

"Inside?"

"Come on."

She tugged at his hand, drew him toward the Face of God. At the chin, they stopped while she tugged at a granite mole and swung a stone door outward. Behind, there were steps chiseled from the rock: broad, rugged platforms that led upwards into darkness. They climbed them, moving from the gray light that flushed through the open door into a dense blackness, then into another area of soft illumination that filtered down from above. Eventually, they came out of the gloomy stairwell into a passageway wide enough for three men to walk abreast. Ahead lay circles of brighter light in the grayness. When they got to these, he found they were the result of light passing through the giant eyes. They were directly behind the godly orbs, looking out and down on an empty temple.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she asked.

He nodded, truly struck with the beauty of the place. "What is the passage for?"

"The bishop would sit up here on holy days that demanded his presence."

"Tell me about this god," he said, running his hands along the rims of the eyes. "What was believed of him?"

She abruptly pulled away from him and turned to look stiffly out over the empty pews.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Something's the matter. Have I violated a taboo?"

"No. Of course not."

"What, then?"

"He was the god—" Her voice broke into a miserable gasping. She silenced herself, tried to collect her wits. "I should not have brought you here."

"Why?"

"He—"

Then he knew; much as men are visited by great revelations in biblical stories, he was touched by the understanding of what she was trying to say but could not. He grasped her and held her against his chest, held her tightly and closely. She cried on his shoulder while he stroked the mane of her hair. "He was the god—" Davis began, trying to say it for her. His own voice broke and refused to speak the rest of it.

She sank to her knees, and he knelt with her. On the floor, together, they cradled each other.

He found his voice again where it cowered in his throat. "He was the god of fertility, wasn't he? The god of the future."

*Exterminated...*

She nodded her head against his chest.

"Don't cry," he said, knowing the foolishness of the statement. Her people were dead, the last of her kind were dying. Why the hell shouldn't she cry?

*Damn the Alliance! Damn the Supremacy of Man! Damn them to hell!*

His curses were like a litany on his tongue, spurting between his tears and echoing about the stone corridor within the head of God. He held her, rocked with her. He lifted her face and kissed her nose. It was tiny and warm against his lips. He kissed her cheeks, neck, hair, lips... And she kissed back, with enthusiasm. He felt her tongue against his, her tears mingled with his.

And the corridors of God's mind knew love...

They told him Demos was a place without danger. Yet there had been the spiderbats when he had landed. The bird diving at the windscreen of the grav

car on the way up from the port... the rat in the demolished gas shelter... And now the love he had for this alien woman. Yes, that was the most dangerous thing of all. And though Proteus floated only a short distance down the ancient passageway, this was the one danger the machine's powers could not protect him from...





## *Chapter Three*

The days seemed to pass as swiftly as the leaves fell from the yellow trees. One fled after the other with such rapidity that autumn was soon fast upon the fringes of winter and the air was nipped with the chill of coming snow. They were usually oblivious to the cold, for there was the warmth between them, the heat of their bodies. Occasionally, as the afternoon waned beyond the portals of the aviary and she would be required to return to the Sanctuary, he would begin thinking of the hopelessness of the situation and a chill would work its way into the base of his spine and crawl upwards along his back like a spider. It was in the fifth week of their lovemaking that time jerked to a halt in its rush past them, and he was forced to confront the nature of their future in a responsible manner.

"When must you leave?" she asked, her head against his chest, her lips trembling on his skin with the words she spoke.

"My notes are pretty complete."

"Soon, then?"

"I can't put them off much longer. Suspicions will grow."

"What can we do?"

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs, trying to clear his head to think. "There are two possibilities, I guess. First, I could fight the miscegenation laws through the courts. That's going to take most all the money I have. And I still might lose—most likely will lose—and go to jail anyway. The other way is for me to leave, have you smuggled off Demos, smuggled onto another world—some backwoods place—and buy a place deep in some wildland area where the neighbors wouldn't be a problem. Then live in secrecy. There are a good many danger points, like smuggling you off, getting you onto a second world without customs finding you..."

"The first would not be so criminal. Maybe they would take that into consideration."

He said nothing, suddenly filled with a panic that threatened to take control of him. It had been all right to theorize about what they could do, to let plans roil over one another in his mind—but to speak them, to talk about them as if a decision must be reached, was more than he could stand up to. He lit a cigarette, savored the smooth smoke of the drug weed, hoping it would relax him more quickly than usual. He tried to speak, to talk over the problem with her, but the words wouldn't come. When she asked what was the matter, he found he could not even look at her. A coldness, a terror, a calculated emotionlessness had seeped into his mind and was struggling to take over the reins and guide his actions.

For a long while, they lay together, saying nothing, listening to the occasional noise of animals in the trees outside and the far and melancholy cry of the Wintercrest, a white, lavishly feathered bird common in the cold months on this part of the continent.

Finally, she asked, "Are you married?"

His voice bounced into his throat unbidden, "Yes." It fell into the air like hot, smoking lead. It was the way out, the way to avoid losing everything. He was not married, of course. But if he could lie, if he could say that he was, if he could dismiss all of this so swiftly with that one, three-letter word, didn't that prove that there wasn't the land of love here that he had once thought there was? Yes. That was it. He had been following along a dangerous trail with only disaster at the end, lulled by infatuation and mistaking that for love. If he had really loved her, he would not have hesitated a moment to risk everything to have her. He would not have lied so glibly, so quickly, so easily. He had very nearly blown everything for infatuation, for lust mixed with curiosity, and that had been sheerest folly.

They were silent a time.

"It's just as well," she said at last. She hesitated, blushed for the first time since he had known her. "So am I."

He tensed against her. "You're married?"

"Do you mind?"

"Uh—"

"If you do—" She started to move as she spoke.

"No. Don't go yet."

Silence. Time passing. The roar of the future speeding darkly on to meet the present and be thrust into the past.

"Is he—a winged man?"

"One of my own? Of course, yes."

"Then why—"

"What?"

"Why leave him to love me like this. I couldn't compare with—" He was furious, and the words stuck in his throat, clung to his lips and would not come forth. He felt that she had been making a fool of him. Surely, loving a man as free as the birds, being enfolded within his wings in joy, could be much better, much more fulfilling than anything a cumbersome, landbound

brute such as he could offer. His tenderest movements would seem gross and stupid in comparison.

"He isn't impotent," she said, "but sterile, just as I am sterile. You are not. I wanted a fruitful man, even if I cannot bear children."

"Then it wasn't me—but simply my juices?"

She squirmed away, stood. "I better be leaving now," she said in her elfin voice. She slipped her heavier winter toga on and walked quickly toward the portal.

He heard her wings.

Proteus came alert at the sound, looked about for an enemy.

Davis rolled onto his face, filled with anger and a sense of loss—and chiefly relief.

The next day came and went, and she did not appear as she had for so many days in the recent past. He made a pretense of correlating his notes, but his mind was elsewhere, tangled in memories of her, lost in the alleyways of her smile. He tried to convince himself that a longing of the flesh could be overcome easily, and that such was all this was. The second day without her was worse. He gave up the phony facade of writing and patrolled the woods about the towers, hands in his pockets, head bent to the chill wind of early winter. Why had he told her he was married? And why, most of all, had he felt such overwhelming relief when he had watched her leave and known it was forever? And why, if he was relieved, did he now ache emptily, like a drained can of fruit left to rust in the ditch, with only particles of sweetness still clinging to the corroded metal? Was it only relief that he was no longer a criminal and only the ache of the aftermath of his fear—or was there, as he suspected, some deeper reason for it?

On the third day, he got in the grav car and set the coordinates for the port, for he had an appointment to keep with Mrs. Bunter's reading club. She had called the previous evening, and he had accepted, anxious to have some reason to flee the confines of this aviary. He sat in the front seat brooding, watching the leaves smack wetly against the windscreen, watching the sky cloud and pack itself for snow.

The club meeting was held in the squat woman's home: a rather palatial mansion with a large drawing room where a podium had been placed before five rows of ten chairs each. He was playing to a full house by the time he began his lecture. They were quite intent, and soon he got wrapped up in telling of the trials and tribulations that had gone into the construction of *Lilian Girl*, *Dark Watch on the River*, and other famous Stauffer Davis novels.

Afterwards, there was a social hour with the traditional lightly alcoholic

punch and homemade cookies. Mrs. Bunter had corralled him and was leading him about, showing off. Proteus followed close to his left, constantly on guard.

"I hope he's been recarded," Mrs. Bunter (who kept telling him to please call her Alice) said, eyeing Proteus cautiously. "I'm wearing a new brooch." She raised a protective hand to the live beetle that skittered across her lapel, straining to the end of its tiny golden chain, then back again.

"Yes," Davis assured her, "he has."

Still, they both noticed the way the machine's plasti-plasma sloshed inside whenever he came near the bug.

Up and down the room, back and forth, corner to corner they went until he had met nearly everyone. He was arm in arm with Alice Bunter now as she exhibited him like a mother with a son freshly graduated from college. The light alcoholic punch only served to bolster his spirits and make him quite talkative. These people were really not so bad, he decided. Wasn't that what he usually discovered? Weren't they always nice when he met them personally in the social period after the lecture? He had a fondness for them, a somewhat paternal affection that made their company desirable.

They came, in time, to the mustached Alliance rep who had secured Davis's aviary and grav car and had ordered Matron Salsbury to deliver food once a week. "My wife thanks you for the autograph," he said, his voice level, harsh, cold, and much more self-possessed than it had been previously.

Davis's head was spinning from too much punch. He had drunk so much that the room danced up and down and the rep kept melting and solidifying in front of him. "Think nothing of it," he said magnanimously.

"Don't worry," the rep said, smiling icily. "I think nothing at all of it. You will be moved into the city tomorrow. Be ready when the van comes for your car and equipment in the morning."

Davis stood, dumbfounded even through the liquor haze. "Why?"

"You should not drink in public, Mr. Davis," he snapped. "You like to boast too much."

"Boast?"

"About the book's deep philosophic themes, about the manner in which you will so brilliantly destroy the Alliance policy of genocide."

Had he said that? And why? Why blurt that out after all the work he had gone to, after all the careful planning he had done to get onto this world and receive the cooperation he needed? Why to these Alliance-oriented people of

all he might have told?

"We don't have to cooperate with those intent on defaming us," the rep said. "You will get a bill for government services. And I should advise that you act more like a god if you wish to play the part." And he was gone.

"Never mind him," Alice Bunter cooed, tugging at Davis's arm to draw him across the room to meet someone else she had just spied. She was too excited about having a celebrity by the arm to consider the consequences of the revelations he had apparently made about his next book.

But he stopped her, stood swaying like the drunk he was. Was the rep right? Could he possibly have been right? Did Davis the author love the worship of these reading club people? Yes. Yes, he did. He erected a facade of disdain in order to delude himself, acted just the slightest bit snobbish with them in order to give credence to that facade; but the cold hard facts said that he had always accepted lecture requests, had always been more than willing to mingle socially afterwards, had always talked about his work to anyone who would listen. He boasted. Old, successful Nobel-winner, Alliance-Literature-Prize-contender Stauffer Davis was looking for the approval of the masses, though he denied it heartily to the academic world and to himself. But he was seeking the droplets of envy, worship, and appreciation that were to be found in the hearts and minds of his fans, was trying to synthesize love out of that mixture. The Alliance rep had been correct.

"There's Mr. Alsace," Mrs. Bunter said. The beetle crawled on her breast.

Suddenly, whatever these people had done to fill the empty can of his soul was drained away. He felt rusted again, dying. Had that been why he had told Leah he was married? If he fought this in court or smuggled her out of Demos and was discovered, the masses would look down on him, disapprove of his racially mixed marriage. By marrying the winged girl, he would be giving up the worship of the reading club people all over the Alliance worlds. So he had lied to her, trying to hang on to the only thread of appreciation he could rely on. He had chosen the adoration of historical novel fans over the love of a woman.

The ceiling bobbed dangerously close.

Vomit tingled in the back of his throat. He forced it down, tore himself free of Alice Bunter.

"Mr. Davis! Stauffer!"

But he was out the door, staggering, leaving them behind to discuss the strange behavior of the Nobel winner who was long overdue for the Alliance Literature Prize.

Proteus floated next to him.

He found the car, almost closed the robot out. It was fortunate that he had not, for the machine would have vibra-beamed the door away if he had. He pulled the grav car onto the highway, ignoring the coordinates and taking manual control. The port city whizzed away and was replaced by grassy hills. The trees came, still dropping leaves. It began to snow...

How long had he been fooling himself? Years. Many of them. He had played the role of the uncaring, the isolationist without need for human companionship. Give me my typewriter, he cried, and I will converse with my own soul! That is sufficient! he had shouted. But it had never been sufficient, not for a second. He had accepted the adulation of his fans, relied upon it. It had become his only contact with people, and without it he would have been shallow and incomplete. He realized now that he had been searching for love, searching for what two dead parents had never given him, had denied him in their bitterness and their determination to destroy one another no matter what the cost. Stauffer, Stauffer, Stauffer... Wife against husband, both of them against the son. When he had grown and they could not live to see his accomplishments, to see that he had made it despite them, he had turned to the masses, opened his heart and wrote for their pleasure and their praises. That had become so important to him that the true love of a winged girl had been momentarily displaced, lost in the greater need for acceptance. But not now. Not any longer...

He drove faster.

Proteus gurgled noisily.

Snow bulleted the windscreen, danced whitely across the hood. It covered the leaves along the road, began decking the trees in soft shrouds...

What would he say to her? Could he make her reject her winged angel to come with him? Could he convince her that he would love and cherish her more than her Demosian lover? He would have to. There was nothing else he could imagine now. There could be no going back to the reading clubs for a hint of love, admiration, appreciation. He knew the phoniness of that, at last, and it was not going to be possible to delude himself with the same routine any longer.

The gyros whined to keep the car as stable as possible while he poured the stress power from the grav plates into the propelling mechanism.

They swept past the towers of the aviaries and onward toward the Sanctuary. The twin breasts were the breasts of a fair maiden now, frosted with snow. He turned toward the ugly black block of the "orphanage" and accelerated. He was afraid she would say no, would stay with the winged boy, leaving him without anything but his loneliness and longing. He constructed arguments as sound as those required to breach the gates of Hell or Heaven, repeated them to himself to get them perfectly in mind. Somehow, they all sounded like pieces of broken glass dropping off his tongue.

He swung the car in front of the steps of the main promenade before the huge double doors of the Sanctuary. He got out, rushed up the steps, through the portals and into a well-lighted lobby.

Proteus hurried behind.

Davis crossed the carpeted floor to where a woman sat behind a reception desk, a gray-haired matron with enormous fallen breasts. "I'm looking for Matron Salsbury," he said, panting.

"You've found her, then," she said, smiling. "I'm Matron Salsbury. And you must be Mr. Stauffer Davis." She rose, trembling visibly with excitement.

Before his encounter with the League rep at Alice Bunter's house, he would have held Matron Salsbury's hand, talked of his books, charmed her with his tales of writing and publishing. Now, all of that was behind him. To engage in any of it would have driven him quite mad. Instead, he snapped, "The girl. Leah. The one who was my guide. Could I see her, please?"

"I'm sorry, but she's not here at the moment."

The alcohol was gone, but he was drunk with fear, fear that she had gone off for an idyllic holiday with her smooth-skinned young angel and that even now they were tangled in love.

"Her husband," Davis said. "Could I speak to him?"

She looked at him blankly. "What?"

He was enraged by her inability to understand so simple a request at so urgent a moment. "Her husband, woman! I want to speak to her husband!"

"I don't understand," she said, looking a bit frightened. "She has no husband. There are only sixteen winged people left. They are all women."

He felt his mouth unhinge.

*Exterminated...*

He closed his mouth, licked his lips with a tongue that felt swollen and dry. She had known what he felt! And to save him the pain and the loss of public respect, she had cunningly offered him this out. If they were married, they were better apart. And each had been lying to the other. She had known it, but he had been ignorant. She had taken steps to insure his career and his ego. To hell with those! he thought.

"Where has she gone?"

Matron Salsbury looked flustered. "I don't know. She sat here in the lobby for two days. She even took her meals here, slept here. She watched those



doors as if she were waiting for someone or—" She stopped as if understanding had struck like lightning inside her head. "And then, just an hour ago or so ago, she left without saying where she was going."

She was still talking as he ran across the lounge, out the doors and down the steps. Proteus came after him, barely bobbling inside before he slammed on the grav car's stress power, kicked at the accelerator and shot across the field between the two hills, not bothering to use the much longer road that connected them. A hundred feet from the temple, the grav plates gave up trying to adjust to the varying distances to the ground and blew on him. The car jolted up the base of the second hill and came to a noisy halt, settling ruggedly to the ground where the rubber rim was sheared away. He opened the door and ran.

Just as he entered the main hall of the great cathedral there was a flapping of wings. Leah departed from one of the teardrop portals high in the walls. The base of the Face of God was open, the chin now a door. She had been into the corridors of the idol's mind, looking out through its eyes, waiting for Stauffer Davis, the famous novelist, the love-seeker, the—he cursed himself—stupidest man in the Alliance! But he had come in just a moment too late, and she had left without seeing him.

He turned, ran down the echo-sharp hall and out onto the rounded dome of the snowy breast, leaving his footprints in its white skin. He looked for her, searched the sky.

She was flitting off toward the yellow mountains.

He called to her, but she was too far away. She could not hear him.

And the car was useless. He could only run.

He ran.

She flew.

The distance between them grew.

She settled before the trees, stepped into the dark of the woods and was gone from sight.

He screamed, but she was too far away to hear.

He ran.

His chest ached. A fire had been set to flashing life in his lungs. He sucked in cool air and blew out steam. Still, he ran, faster and faster—but not as fast as he thought he had to. He was over the edge of the temple hill, streaking along the fields toward the trees. Minutes passed before he reached them.

He called her name.

She was too far ahead. The thickness of the trees soaked up his words. There was no echo. The snow drifted down around him, filtered through the tight web of branches and sifted the forest floor.

Proteus came behind.

Which way? Would she go straight ahead or slant to the left? To the right? He sobbed, moved straight on, leaping over fallen logs, kicking piles of leaves up around him as he went. He skidded on the snow once, sprawled onto his face, skinning his cheek. He lay for a moment, tasting dirt and blood. Then he shoved up and went on, aware that a moment's delay might mean the difference between success or failure.

He called her name again.

Silence.

He hurried on.

Then a cry and the howl of wolves. A scream!

He stopped and listened, head cocked to catch the exact direction of the noise. There was a second scream, one that trailed off like a dying siren. It was to his left. He started in that direction. In a moment, a baying of savage hounds moaned through the cold air and snow slithered like thick, cold oil between the trees.

Proteus moved up beside him.

In the darkness ahead, two glimmering red eyes the size of walnuts peered at Davis between the thick trunks of the yellow-leafed trees. A wolf loped closer, skidded to a stop and stared at what it evidently hoped might be its supper. Its jaws hung open, dripping saliva onto the frosted ground. It growled deep in its thick throat, spat, blew snot from its nose.

Proteus opened with his vibra-beam weapon, blasted the darkness with blue flames.

The wolf danced onto two legs, twirled, collapsed onto the snow. Blood splattered outward from the charred body and patterned the whiteness.

Davis stepped over the corpse and moved on. *Please*, he thought, *don't let her be dead...*



## *Chapter Four*

Snow was falling more heavily now, drifting through the trees where the leaves had been worn away by the tireless hands of autumn, matting Davis's eyelashes so that he had to keep brushing them to see.

There was more howling ahead, deep and guttural, a brother to the sigh of the wind itself.

He scrambled over a formation of rocks, stumbled on a small log concealed by snow and leaves, and came to the clearing where she was stretched out on the ground, head raised slightly against a yil tree base. There was a wolf circling her, its teeth bared, a snarl held deep in its throat where it was releasing it only a note at a time.

There were teeth marks above her wrist where it had nipped her experimentally, and blood dribbled down over her hand.

Davis screamed to draw the wolf's attention. It turned from her, staring at him with hot coal eyes, its jowls quivering and slopped with crimson. He shouted at it again, screaming nonsense syllables. It looked at him, snarled, bared teeth that were jagged and strong. It turned back to her and started to move in toward her neck.

Davis grabbed a fistful of leaves and snow, packed them together and threw the ball at the beast. It bounced off its flank, and the wolf turned to Davis again, padded away from the girl. It leaped—

Proteus shot the animal, flicked on the vibra-beam and fried its body while it was still in flight. The charred corpse crashed at Davis's feet, its yellow teeth bared in a crisped snarl.

"Go away!" she said, making as if to get up and run.

"I'm not married," he said. "Anyway, not to anyone but you."

She stopped trying to get up and collapsed back onto the snowy earth, looked up at him strangely for a moment, then started to cry, though he knew she was not crying in sadness.

Proteus hummed around the trees, alert, searching, its sensors seeking heat and sound and sight and even olfactory stimulation.

He went to her, knelt, took her wounded arm. It was not a serious bite, though it was swollen and blue. Clots had formed, but it should be cleaned and sterilized and lathered with speedheal ointment and a speedheal bandage. He tried to get his arms under her, but she fought him.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked, angrily trying to make her hold still.

"They'll put you in jail," she said.

"I've got the money to fight it."

"But you'll lose everything." She bit him on the hand.

"Goddamned little she-wolf!" he said, laughing.

"You'll lose everything!" she repeated.

"Look," he said, pointing to dark shapes moving toward them through the yil trees. "See those?"

"Wolves."

"Right. Very good. Now let me tell you something. I am going to stay right here if you won't let me take you out of the woods. I'm going to wait for those wolves and kill them one at a time, with Proteus, until there are too many for the robot to handle. Then I'll let them kill both of us if I can't stop them with my hands. Proteus can only do so much, you know. He wasn't designed to work at optimum efficiency in some exotic situation like this."

As if in confirmation of all Davis had said, the robot's plasti-plasma began gurgling loudly. It could, of course, handle these wolves long enough to scare them off, but there was no sense telling her that.

"But you'll lose everything!"

"Money. Some fans. We'll fight it, and we'll win it."

She looked at him, seemed to wilt, as if she had been holding herself stiff and alert through sheer willpower. As she sagged and whimpered that the bite on her arm hurt very badly, he lifted her in his arms much as he might have carried a child, careful that her wings were folded and would not get torn or bent by his rough handling. As he turned to find their way back to the fields, the wolves moved in even closer.

To his right, one of the hefty, slavering monsters hunched its shoulders and hung its neck low to the ground, pawed at the earth. Its hind legs tensed, all the muscles standing out even through the thick coat of hair.

"Gun right!" he ordered Porteus.

The machine turned.

The wolf bounded two steps, soared into the air...

... erupted like a match head in the searing brilliance of the vibra-beam, died howling like a banshee.

The other beasts backstepped a bit, lowered their heads and made deep moaning noises that the wind snatched and carried away, changed into the crying of children, then the buzzing of bees, then nothingness.

Davis carried her back over the leaf-covered log, worked around the thrusting teeth of the rock formation, snagging her toga several times and looking up anxiously at each halt to make certain Proteus was still watchful. The wolves paralleled their exit, staying behind the trunks of the yil trees, their scarlet eyes flashing now and again in the dense gloom—the only signs of their presence outside of an occasional brutish mutter.

At last, the edge of the woods loomed ahead; the snow-blanketed fields visible and—despite their icy dress—warmly welcome beyond. He shifted her slightly, directed her to hang onto his neck with her good arm, and looked around at the pairs of gleaming bloodspots that indicated the positions of the wolves. There were eight of them that he could locate, all too close for comfort. But there was nothing to do but go ahead and rely on Proteus. He stepped away from the yil bole against which he had been leaning, hugged Leah's body to his chest, and walked briskly toward the light and the open spaces.

There was a rustle of movement behind him, and he was conscious of Proteus arcing above his head, training his guns downward. There was a crackle of vibra weapon, the smell of burning fur and roasting meat Davis did not stop to look back but maintained the pace he had set for himself.

To their left, two of the wolves charged, covering great lengths of ground with each powerful bounding stride. Proteus sprayed both of them with the deadly weapon's bluish light and caught them before they were even off the ground. Around them, dried leaves, under the thin blanket of snow, flashed and burned in an instant, left only a pall of smoke and no coals.

Then Davis was through the trees and into the field where he could not be approached on the sly. The wolves, the five that were left, raced out after him, passed him, started coming back in, trying to corner him between the woods and themselves. They were great, slaving demons, cancerous growths against the white purity of the snow, but he knew that—though they might look mythological, unreal—their bite and their clawing would be perfectly solid, painful, and murderous.

Proteus met this challenge as he had met all the others. He brought down two of the wolves with the vibra weapon, sent them rolling and kicking backwards until they were coated with snow and ice and looked like plaster of Paris figures. The remaining three beasts decided that enough was more than plenty, turned to the left, toward a projection of the yil trees, tails between their legs, and raced through the snow, kicking clouds of the fine particles up

in their wake.

Davis slowed down, caught his breath for a moment. The car was useless now that its grav plates had been destroyed. He could see it, alongside the temple hill, canted to one side, the rubber rim twisted up the side of it like a snake. He looked toward the Sanctuary. Matron Salsbury should have another grav car, surely, which he could use to get the girl back to the aviary where his speedheal medical kit lay.

He looked down at Leah to tell her what he had planned, but found she was unconscious. Her head hung limply against her bosom, and her breath was coming raggedly. He looked at the wolf bite, saw that it was more swollen than before, and that the vein leading away from it was puffed and black. Either the bite had given her natural blood poisoning, or the fangs of the wolves contained some noxious chemical that might be—no, very clearly was—of a deadly nature.

He looked frantically in all directions, as if someone might be about who could help, then turned toward the Sanctuary and, holding her more tightly than ever, he began running through the inch of snow that had fallen, his feet slipping and sliding, but somehow managing to maintain his balance. His ears were so cold they ached, and he imagined the girl must be freezing with nothing more on than the heavyweight toga. Her bare legs dangled over his arm where the garment had ridden up, and he almost stopped to tuck it properly around her to keep her warm, then realized any waste of time was also a waste of the droplets of life she still possessed.

He ran faster, fell on his back once, numbing himself though he managed to hold her and cushion her from being injured. It was a struggle getting to his feet without laying her in the snow, but he did not want to let her out of his arms.

In minutes, he reached the Sanctuary, staggered up the steps with her, his throat afire and dry, his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He raced for the door, was about to slow to push it open when it opened of its own accord, giving him entrance. He went through, stopped in the foyer, puffing and unable to speak. He looked up, expecting to see Matron Salsbury, but was confronted with the face of the Alliance rep instead.

The rep drew on his mustache with one hand, looked at the girl, then up into Davis's face. In his other hand, he held a pistol.

"She's been bitten by a wolf," Davis said, the words harsh and wheezed, an octave too high.

"Drop her," the rep said.

"Get help for her quickly," Davis pleaded.

"Drop her," the rep said, pointing at her with the pistol. "I must warn you that I was an Alliance soldier before entering the diplomatic corps. With my training, I have no inhibitions about violence. I'm capable of—well, of anything, really. Drop her."

Proteus made grumbling sounds.

"And a protection robot isn't designed to strike out at any other human being, Davis. So forget that."

He started to bend over with Leah, to place her on the carpet.

"I did not tell you to lay her down. I told you to drop her. Just let her go."

He ignored the rep and placed her gently on the floor.

"That was a bad move," the ex-soldier said. "Another strike against you: disobeying an officer of the Alliance. That carries two years in itself. I think you had best be more courteous."

"How did you get here so quickly?" Davis asked.

"I came around to visit Matron Salsbury to discuss you, to see if she knew of any misdemeanor—violating the preserve laws or anything—we might harass you with. She had just told me what she discovered about you and the animal there when you obliged us by charging right in with your little beast." He smiled.

Davis looked down at the girl. "Will you get help for her? She's dying. A simple speedheal unit would—"

"Let her die," the rep said, still smiling.

Davis looked astonished.

"Davis, what you forgot is that no matter how intelligent an alien may seem to be, no matter how clever, it is inferior. It is not a man. Man is the highest order of life. Why do you think, in all these years of exploration into space, we've never met a race that could compete with us? We were meant to be the dominant species, man. And in the million years to come, we're not going to run across anything we can't handle. You tainted yourself by touching this little animal. You should have known better. And because you made a fool out of me and set my chances of promotion back five years by your little ruse about the sort of book you were going to write, I think I should have an opportunity to pay you back, in some small way, for your brutality. And, perhaps, if you watch her die, you'll realize that she was nothing more than an animal, a beast, a thing. She'll die, and there won't be choruses of angels singing her to her final resting place."



"You're insane."

"No," the rep said. "It's you who are insane." He stepped forward and pushed a toe of his boot against the girl's side, shoved her hard enough to flop her over on her belly. "See, Davis, insanity is judged, in part, by what is standard for society. Someone who breaks the greatest taboos with the least regard for his own being is often labeled as a lunatic. Loving an alien is very abnormal. So you will surely be judged mad as well as a traitor."

In one swift, clean movement, Davis locked hands and brought the resultant club in an upswing that caught the rep under the chin, snapped his head back. The ex-soldier's eyes rolled up until they were all white, and he toppled backwards, crashed onto the floor, his head striking hard at the temple. He had never been expecting a civilian to possess the ability to commit such a vicious act of violence against another human being, and his smugness had made it the simplest thing in the world for Davis to take him out of the picture.

Davis looked up, saw Matron Salsbury running for a phone screen outlet near the reception desk. He bounded after her, pulled her away from it after she had punched out two of the eight numbers, cleared the board by tapping the "cancel" bar, and shoved her back toward the rep who was lying quite still.

"What are you going to do to us?" she asked.

"Sit down!" he ordered her, pushing her next to the unconscious Alliance man. She plopped next to him, her fatty body jiggling with the impact. "Don't move and you'll not be hurt."

"He was right," she said, her voice quavering on the edge of hysteria. "You are mad."

Davis ignored her, well aware that no amount of facts, logic, or argument could ever sway someone with her sort of mind, just as the rep would never renounce one of his prejudices. Their lives were based on the assumption that they were superior, at least, to aliens. If they should ever be convinced that many, many aliens were their intellectual superiors, their psyches would crumble in the instant. They were inferior people, the lackeys of those in power, and without the government behind them, they would be jellyfish and nothing more.

He tore down the draperies over the high windows, ripped each panel in two long strips and used these to bind both the rep and the Sanctuary keeper, tying them stoutly enough to last until he came up with something to get he and Leah out of this mess. When that was done, he turned to the girl, rolled her over, and examined the progress of the black line up her delicate arm. It was growing quite near her armpit. In another fifteen minutes, she might very well be dead. Perhaps sooner. Her breathing was shallow, birdlike, and the beat of her large heart was fast, much faster than it should be even for a

Demosian.

"Do you have a speedheal kit around here?" he asked Matron Salsbury.

"No," she said.

He knelt, slapped her twice across the face. "He thought I couldn't hurt him. Don't make the same mistake." He held the rep's gun at her neck. He had not acquired so much of a violence drive that he could kill a human being, but as long as she did not know that, it was an effective threat.

"There's an infirmary on the ground floor here," she said. "That door, the green one. There should be a speedheal equipment racked in the open."

He patted her cheek, smiled, and raced into the infirmary where he located and brought back a speedheal kit inside of two minutes. When he returned to the lounge, Matron Salsbury was whispering to the rep, trying to wake him. He was moaning a little, but still fairly well out. "Save your breath," Davis said, enjoying the way she snapped her head around to look at him, frightened and confused. After being terrified, for weeks, of what the Alliance would do to him if it discovered his indiscretion, it was nice to see the Alliance people doing the cowering.

He lifted Leah and placed her on one of the comfortable sofas, which dotted the floor of the lobby, on her back so that he could keep close watch on her respiration and the vitality of her heartbeat. Opening the medical kit, he began extracting the tools he would require to work on her and was soon absorbed by the job of stopping the advancing line of poison before it was too late to contain it and destroy it. For a while, he thought he was going to lose the race against the infection, but then he had the foreign element on the retreat, eliminated it, and was nearly to home base. He applied the speedheal bandages, set the circuits into operation, checked the power level of the microminiature battery attached to the yellow cloth, and settled back, feeling as if a ton or two of steel had been lifted from each shoulder. She was going to be all right.

"Very touching," the rep said from behind him. He whirled, but the Alliance man was still tied properly. "Very touching, but foolish. Now you have a third charge against you: molesting an officer of the Alliance. Damn, I'll bet that charge hasn't been leveled against anyone in this century. How did you do it, Davis? How were you able to hit me?"

He didn't want to explain that the antiviolence taboo had shattered and died in that gas shelter when he had had to resort to violence to save a girl he loved from the claws and teeth of a rat—or watch her die and be torn apart. He didn't want to explain that such a thing might not be strong enough stimulus to push every modern Alliance citizen into violence, but that it was plenty for a man who had been seeking love all his life and had never found it until he had met that girl. So he didn't explain. And refusing to explain to an

Alliance officer made him feel even tougher and more of a man than he felt now—and he felt better at this moment than he had in all the rest of his life.

"Look," he said to the mustachioed rep, "you're going to be my hostage to see that I get public notice. Otherwise the Alliance might stick me in a back room somewhere and no one would ever hear of me. If I'm to have a fair chance, I have to be allowed a trial. If it's splashed all over the statsheets on the next news hour, the Alliance won't dare try to railroad me without due process. And all I want is a chance to fight the miscegenation laws."

"Go to hell," the rep snarled.

"You'll call your boys off if they—"

"I'd rather," the rep hissed, his voice tight and whispered, "order them to shoot to kill, whether or not I'm liable to be shot also. You've ruined a career I've worked years to build. They won't ever advance me within the diplomatic corps. And I won't be permitted back in the army. That means their going to condemn me to a civilian position, and I couldn't stand that. I'd rather die first."

"I believe you," Davis said soberly. "Without power of some sort, military, or governmental, your type of pest can't survive."

The rep spat on him.

"That hit home, didn't it?"

"Go to hell."

"You're repeating yourself. You gave me that direction only a short while ago."

"So all you can do is run," the rep said, managing to smile again. "And with winter setting in, how far will you get? You can't leave the planet with her. And I think you're stupid enough to stay here rather than leave her behind."

Davis did not respond, except by tearing down the last two panels of drapes and ripping them up to bind the two prisoners more thoroughly. He finished the job with two tight and effective gags, then dragged them to a supplies closet behind the reception desk. He loaded the rep into the cubbyhole, then decided he might as well have as much information as possible with which to make their escape. He removed the gag from Matron Salsbury.

"When will you be missed?"

"Supper's over. Not until breakfast. I don't always make a room check at

night anymore."

"Where are the other girls?"

"Upstairs, in the game room."

He stuffed the gag back in her mouth, wrapped the band around her face to keep it in, knotted it tightly behind her head. She was harder to move than the man had been, heavier and more hysterical. When he had her wedged into the closet, facing the rep, he closed the door and hurried back to Leah. She was still sleeping, but he could not afford to wait for her to wake. He lifted her, carried her outside, down the steps, and across the flat parking area to the grav car that the rep had driven up from the port in.

He placed her in the passenger's seat, strapped her in, waited until Proteus had clambered in the back, then slipped behind the wheel and reached for the controls. It was then, that he first noticed the blinking amber light above the radio that indicated a call was being made. He contemplated answering it and trying to fake it out, but knew that would end in dismal failure. Better to let it ring. Eventually, they would begin to worry, but perhaps not for an hour or two. And by that time, he and Leah might be too far along in their escape for it to matter.

Escape...

He looked to the mountains, the heavy clouds hanging low on them, and the sheets of snow that were driving before a stiff wind that looked as if it might grow more fierce as the storm worsened during the night. That was their escape: the mountains, the wildlands of Demos. With that rep in command of the Alliance police on Demos, there would be no chance of running up the legal flag and battling this in courts. No chance at all. If they could not avoid the police, they were dead. They were probably equally as dead if they tried escaping into the mountains at the beginning of the winter, but there was no other proposition, open to them. The rep had seen to that.

For the first time, Davis realized that he did not even know the Alliance representative's name. He had just been a puppet of the government. There had never been initial cordialities. He had not thought to ask, and the Alliance man had not thought to volunteer the information. It was the ultimate proof of the dehumanization of man by bureaucracy. The little ex-soldier with the mustache was no longer an individual, but a cog in the corporate image of the Alliance government, the Supremacy of Man party, adhering to doctrine, driven by dogma, unthinking and uncaring about anything but power and the means of obtaining it.

The radio light continued to blink.

He started the grav car, pulled away from the Sanctuary, and pushed the accelerator all the way down as he followed the road back to the aviary which

contained his things, from which they would have to pack their provisions for the long trek ahead...



## *Chapter Five*

She had not regained consciousness by the time they reached the aviary, and though he did not feel good about interrupting her sleep, he administered a stimulant to her with a hypodermic and began vigorously rubbing her cheeks and hands. There was so little time to do so much that he required her assistance every step of the way.

She stirred, muttered sleepily, sat partway up without opening her oval eyes. Her wings uncrinkled a bit, strained to open, then settled back and folded into place. She shook her head, made blubbering sounds, and finally looked up at him. There were dark circles under her eyes, but they only served to make her that much more stunning, intriguing.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"At the aviary with my things."

"The wolves..."

"I'll tell you as we pack things," he said, pulling her to her feet. "You feel up to working a little?"

"I'm tired. But I can manage," she said.

"The arm?"

"It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Let's hurry then."

She took time to kiss him, once, long and languidly, then they began rounding up compact food products, concentrates, thermos jugs for water, portable electric torches, everything it seemed likely they might find use for and be able to carry without much trouble. Once, she paused to try to persuade him that he should turn her back to them, try to make amends. He convinced her that such a suggestion not only insulted him and underrated his feelings about her but was totally fanciful since the Alliance rep was now out for blood and revenge and would never accept anything less. The packing resumed at the same furious pace.

"But where are we going?" she asked as they worked the last of the items Davis felt they needed into the rucksacks and the single suitcase.

He started to answer, then only packed more quickly. Several minutes later, he said, "If we can get to the woods, buy some time, maybe they'll think we died in the mountains during the winter. Maybe we will. But we'll try like the devil not to. And if we make it, maybe, in the spring, I'll be able to go into

the port city without any trouble, unrecognized."

"It's no good," she said.

He shrugged. He knew it was unworkable as well as she. But what else had been left open to them? They were nothing now but two scurrying creatures caught in the web of the megalomaniacs, the power seekers, mice in the walls of an inconceivably vast social order. Their only chance was to act exactly like mice, living off that order, in the fringes of that order, without being discovered and eradicated. Not the best of lives. But better than being dead.

"I may have a suggestion," she said.

He continued to pack, stuffing the last few items into the bulging rucksack. "What's that?"

"A fortress."

He looked up as he strapped the flap of the sack down, not quite grasping what she was trying to tell him. "What?"

"A fortress. Remember my telling you about them, about how they were supposed to be the thing that would turn the course of the war in the favor of my people?"

The word clicked into place then, and all the notes he had taken on the subject and studied in detail appeared before his mind with the almost total recall he possessed. According to Leah, the Demosian government had constructed, during the tail end of the war when the sterilizing gases had had their effect and there was a grave shortage of fighters, four fortresses deep within the earth, scattered over this one large continent on which most of the winged people had made their homes. The fortresses were deep, impregnable shelters against every sort of attack and were equipped with, according to rumors, experimental laboratories for the development of new weapons—and experimental genetics labs which were to find some method of producing more Demosians without the need of fertile men and women. The great push by the Alliance forces had come just as the fortresses were completed, and the men who would have staffed them were needed in the last desperate attempt to stave off the Earthmen—which, of course, failed. The fortresses, if they ever had existed, were never discovered. Leah's grandfather had been an engineer in charge of the heavy construction workers in the building of the nearest of these fortresses and had been assigned, with his family, to occupy quarters there to take charge of the maintenance once the structure was in operation. But he died in the last battle.

"Could these fortresses be myths?" he asked. "A desperate people will evolve all sorts of ethereal fantasies to give them hope."



"My grandfather was a realist," she said. "It was no myth."

"And you know the location?"

"Not exactly. But from listening to my grandfather and analyzing what I can remember, I've since decided it has to be inside the mountain we call Tooth, which is a good ways from here, but not so far that we cannot make it on these provisions."

He thought a moment, then stood, grabbed the rucksacks. "It's worth a try. We don't have anything better in mind. Don't get your hopes up, love. Even if there is a fortress, it might very well be crumbling and uninhabitable."

"They were not built to crumble."

"Perhaps," he said, smiling. "I'll take these out to the car and come back for the suitcase. You think you can wear that coat without hurting your wings?"

She looked at the two coats he had laid out for them, picked up a huge, furry Alaskan survival coat that would come down below his knees an inch or two but which came to her toes. "It'll be all right."

He loaded the car, helped her down the rickety stairs since she could not fly while wearing the survival coat, and got her in the car. He wore the fall coat he had, plus several shirts, and he was not too cold—though he wondered whether a day or two spent in the open would have him as warm.

"Trouble," he said as he pulled the grav car out onto the lane which the snow had obscured.

"What?" she asked.

He pointed to the radio. "The bulb has stopped blinking. Which means they may have decided their rep is in trouble."

The snow whooshed up around them, obliterating the forest on either side as the grav plates' field disturbed the powdery stuff. Davis drove the car back the lane, toward the Sanctuary, until Leah directed him to the best point of entrance into the woods for the journey to the mountain called Tooth and the fortress that might or might not be there. He angled across open fields at her insistence, which meant the speed of the grav car had to be reduced. He kept anxiously studying the road in the rearview mirror, certain the dark shapes of police vans would glide into view at any moment. It was a good four miles through the rising, sparsely vegetated foothills, always rising, disappearing from the highway for short moments, then reappearing again as they started up the slope of the next hill which was higher than the last. In ten minutes, they arrived at the edge of the woods where he drove the car between the trees, scraping the paint from it, tearing off a strip of chrome, but effectively

concealing it from anyone down there on the lane who might chance to look up and see the dark gleam of metal.

"It's on foot now," he said. "I'm going to give you an injection of adrenalin and a few c.c.s of a speedheal restorative. Roll up your sleeve."

She struggled with the bulky garment, finally managed to oblige, and didn't protest when the needles punctured her slim arm. Two little marks of blood were left behind, but she had bled enough recently not to be bothered by that.

"I'll carry a rucksack on each shoulder and switch the suitcase from hand to hand until you've built enough energy through those drugs to lend me support."

"I can do it now," she said.

"Yeah. Maybe for ninety seconds. Come on, love. I know you're a brave girl and a strong girl, but let's be honest with ourselves. When we're tired, we rest. If we don't make that rule, we'll collapse before we're a third of the way to this fortress of yours."

They got out, Proteus immediately behind, and Davis loaded up with the gear. As he was picking up the suitcase, both rucksacks firmly on his shoulders, Leah gasped and said, "Look! Down at the Sanctuary!"

He looked back down the rippling landscape at the temple and the Sanctuary, which was only partially visible on the other side of the religious structure. Perched on the hilltop around the ugly place were four grav vehicles much too large to be anything but police vans. Even as they watched, the things began moving away from the Sanctuary, down the lane toward the aviary where he had been doing his research. Their headlights were like the luminous eyes of giant moths, slicing down the darkness that had begun to descend. In minutes, they would find their prey had fled. And, Davis noted miserably, the grav car had left a perfect trail up the foothills to the forest, a trail a blind and noseless bloodhound could follow. The only thing that might possibly yet save them was the night which was rapidly settling over the land.

"Come on," he said to Leah. "I'll break the trail." He stomped off into the trees, trying not to look as frightened as he was...



## *Chapter Six*

If it wouldn't have been for the snow and the bitter cold, Davis would have praised their luck and thanked every god he had ever heard of. They climbed on through the dark hours without being molested, trusting to the faint gleam of the snow cover whenever that was possible and breaking out a hand torch when the trees grew too thickly to allow natural light in—what little of it there was—and they could no longer trust to put their feet down before them, unable to make out the lay of the land and any obstacles or pitfalls that might be present. There was no sound of pursuit, no voices on the slopes below, no copter blades overhead. The mountainside was often steep, but never so sharply angled that climbing gear or techniques were required. These were old mountains, a range that had been weathered away through thousands of years. It was more like hiking, though strenuous and exhausting. Still, all would have been well if the storm had not grown and grown in fury, mounting into the range of blizzards with every passing hour.

The wind roared through the tress, rattling the many-forked branches so rudely that there was a continual dull roar over which they had to shout if they wished to speak. Often, he felt as if he stood below a mighty waterfall, within inches of the spot where the river dashed itself into the rocks. As long as the trees were tightly packed, the worst of the stinging cold was blocked from them. But several times, they were forced to pass through long stretches where the density of the trees was as much as 50% below average and the howling hurricanelike masses of air tore down upon them, made them bend double to keep from being blown away. Once, on a steeper slope where the wind was banked off the mountain above and shunted right down through the nearly treeless expanse they were trying to negotiate, they had had to hold tightly to the trees, Davis locking his legs around her body to hold her as best he could. In the short moments when the wind abated, they would rush forward to another handhold, anchor themselves in time to be struck again by the hammering blows of their invisible enemy.

By the middle of the night, the snow was falling so hard that it was nearly impossible to see more than an arm's length ahead, even with the aid of the electric torch. Davis had never seen such a heavy storm in his life and found himself, for long moments, stopping to look with wonder at the white deluge that was smothering the land. Invariably, Leah would stop behind, holding his free hand, squeezing it to urge him onward. He wished he had given himself the energy boost he had provided her with the drugs of the medkit.

They made the top of the mountain some time before dawn and struck across the relatively flat topland, grateful for the chance to just walk without the necessity to fight the pull of gravity and the slipperiness of the earth that wanted to send them tumbling backwards and down. They made very good time once on the level, despite the drifts that bogged them down and concealed obstacles which Davis, more and more, found himself tripping

over, sprawling into the wetness with all their gear. Leah had been carrying the suitcase for some time, but the weight of the two rucksacks was enough to make him feel as if his feet were not only sinking through snow at every step, but through an inch or two of the ground as well.

As the first rays of light touched the sky behind the thick cloud cover and made the gray horizon a slightly lighter shadow, they reached the far side of the mountain and came to the point where the ground began to slope downwards again. In the first hundred yards of the descent into the ravine between this and the next looming landrise, he fell twice, almost knocking himself out the second time. When he got up to continue, she grabbed his arm and said she was very tired.

When he turned, certain she was only trying to save his feelings by blaming a halt on herself, he found that her eyes were sunken, her cheeks drawn and pale inside the hood of the Alaskan survival outfit. He had forgotten that the energy those drugs had provided would not stop the wear and tear on her body, but would only give her the energy to go on despite the way she felt. She must be agonizingly weary, as exhausted as he was. He nodded, struggled a hundred yards back up the slope, found a copse of trees in which the snow was not so deep as in the more open land. He shucked off the baggage, took a large square of durable plastic out of the suitcase, unfolded it, tied it to some branches to make a partially effective lean-to in which they might huddle.

Inside, they sat close, sharing what bodily warmth managed to escape through their heavy clothing. Now that the harsh whip of the wind was off them, it seemed not nearly so cold as it had all night—even when they were walking and constantly on the move, building bodily warmth. They did not talk, simply because they were too weary to think of what to say, to form the words if they could think. And their mouths were a slight bit numb from the stinging cold. Words, however, proved unnecessary. They opened two cans of stew with warming tabs in their bases and enjoyed a hot meal. They drank water from one of the bottles, then filled up what they had drunk with snow. When they were finished, they leaned together again, head to head, and nestled under the blanket which had heat radiators woven into its threads, an item Davis was especially pleased to have thought of bringing.

*Madness, he thought. Madness, madness, madness... We'll never make it. We don't even know, for certain, where we're going. We may even be lost at this moment, though she thinks she knows her way around. Madness...*

He looked at Proteus, bobbling at the other end of the lean-to, and wondered what the mechanical protection system was thinking—if it were capable of initiating a thought on its own. Cold was another quantity/condition which it could not protect him from. He could freeze to death, if he had not remembered this blanket, and Proteus could do nothing to stop the slow but certain progress for even a fraction of a second.

He was struck with the thought that Proteus was a fugitive now too. Proteus was running with them, was here to protect them so they could escape from the Alliance government. That made him a traitor and a fugitive from "justice." He wanted to laugh but did not have the energy, and he fell asleep before he could frame even a fragment of another train of thought...

It was not a quiet sleep.

This was not the time for that.

There were dreams:

*He was in a house made of ice, each room a frigid cubicle without differentiation. He was naked, and his skin was growing blue, numbing, lacing over with glittering particles of frost...*

*He was trying to find the doorway...*

*There did not appear to be one.*

*It grew colder and colder until, shimmering out of nothingness, stalactites and stalagmites formed in the room, made of ice, effectively barring his way and making him a prisoner of this one chamber.*

*Then, as he crumpled on the floor and felt his strength ebbing out of him, one spot in the wall began to melt, the water running down and puddling around him, warm and pleasant, life-giving. A portal appeared in the wall, and Leah was there, smiling. She walked toward him, seeming to skim on the water, and the ice melted around her and the cold air became warm. He grasped her, and feeling returned to his flesh.*

*And just as they were kissing, a man without a face, dressed in a blue uniform with brass buttons, tapped Davis on the shoulder, separated him from Leah, and started leading her away.*

*The ice began to reform.*

*The flesh that had been warm grew cold again.*

*He raced frantically after the uniformed man and the girl, trying to regain her, but his feet kept freezing to the floor, slowing his progress, while they moved swiftly, the ice melting before them and solidifying behind...*

*He wasn't going to catch her.*

*Never...*

*Ever...*

*He opened his mouth to scream, wondering if that would crack the ice*

*walls of his prison...*

... and was awakened by the boom of a pistol shot fired very nearby...

He grabbed for his own gun, slapping his hand against an empty holster. He had confiscated the weapon from the Alliance representative at the Sanctuary, and now someone had confiscated it from him, in turn. He looked about the lean-to and saw Proteus; nodes gleaming all colors as the machine bobbled irritably, swayed from side to side as it tried to ascertain just what sort of role it should play in the transpiring events. Leah was near the left opening of the shelter, and it was she who had lifted his pistol from the holster and had been using it. She held it in both hands, as if it were too heavy for her to manage in one, and pointed it at the white landscape beyond the entrance.

"What is it?" he asked. Suddenly, it seemed as if they must have been mad to stop and sleep.

"Wolves," she said.

He relaxed a little. Wolves might be cunning and powerful, but not so cunning and not so powerful as a man with a gun or a vibra-beam weapon working as a soldier of the Alliance. He moved over to where she sat, looked through the opening. Not more than six feet away, a great gray-brown wolf, much like those that Proteus had fought off the day before, sprawled in the thick carpet of snow, great red blotches of blood staining the purity around it. Its mouth was open, its tongue lolled to the side.

"I didn't want to wake you," she said. "I thought this might be equipped with a built-in silencer. It wasn't."

"I didn't know you could use a gun," he said.

"Everyone was a soldier in the last days of the war."

"I guess so."

"There are others," she said quietly, staring intently at the clumps of brush that pushed through the snow.

"Where?"

"They scattered when I shot. But they're not too far away. You can be sure of that."

"Proteus—"

"I discovered something unsettling about your Proteus," she interrupted, looking behind at the grav-plated weapons system which floated above the earth in absolute silence.

"What?"

"He's *your* protection robot, not mine. The wolves kept coming closer. He kept scanning them, very attentively, but I realized that he was not going to shoot any of them unless they went for *you*. If they attacked me, it was perfectly all right."

He nodded, a quiver of horror running through him as he contemplated the serious oversight in their preparations he had made. He had been thinking of Proteus as *their* guardian, not as his own private soldier, for he had been extending the new concept of "us" everywhere the old concept of "me" had prevailed. But Proteus would be oblivious of emotional developments such as that and would stand blithely by and watch her perish if her own life was not imperiled by the same enemy and at the precise same instant as Davis's own.

The cataracted eyes of the spherical defender stared out into the winter wasteland: white viewing white.

"From now on," he said, "we'll tie the plastic down so that there's only a single entrance instead of two. If I hadn't been so tired this morning, I would have done that. Then I'll sleep near the open side, with Proteus near the entrance." He pushed up the sleeve of his coat and the sleeves of the two sweaters which he wore beneath it. "We've been asleep for about five hours. It's getting on toward the end of the morning. If we're going to make use of the daylight to walk, we'd better get started."

They drank more water and ate some chocolate, then carefully folded the blanket to unalign its heat emanators so that they could cool, packed things away, took down the plastic sheet that formed their shelter and stowed that. In fifteen minutes, they were ready to move out, with Leah carrying the suitcase and Davis toting both rucksacks. They set out down the mountainside with a great deal more ease than they had managed in their sleepiness and exhaustion the first time, five or six hours ago.

The terrible winds had died, though there were now and then gusts that startled them and unbalanced them, toppling them into snowbanks. The snow was still falling, rather heavily but in less than a blizzard pace. They could see some distance ahead, and the way looked uniformly easy down this ravine and up the other side, at least. There were drifts of snow as high as their waists in some spots, though these could most always be circumvented if they took time and patience to find their way. Everywhere, the white stuff was up to mid-calf on Davis and up to the girl's knees, which slowed and tired them and made them wonder whether they would be able to make the sort of time necessary to stay well ahead of the Alliance forces that must—at dawn—have struck out on their trail.

When they reached the bottom of the depression and started up the opposite slope, they found that going down through the waves of the drifts had been far easier than pushing upwards through them. They were required,



now, to fight the angle of the earth, the treacherous and unseen footing beneath winter's blanket, and the stiff resistance of more than a foot of fine, tightly packed snow. Near the top, they were presented with yet another obstacle: an overhanging drift that crowned the last twenty feet of their path and made reaching the top of the second mountain difficult if not impossible. At Davis's suggestion, they worked to the right, moving horizontally now, searching for a break in the overhang through which they might struggle to achieve the blessed levelness of the summit. But they found, three hundred yards along, that the ravine dropped into a sheer cliff where there was no toehold and that the overhanging drift continued beyond even this. They were forced to backtrack, following their own footprints, until they came to their starting point. They worked left, then, and found much the same situation there as well. There was no break at all in the deep and unscalable snow wall that blocked their progress.

"What now?" Leah asked, setting the suitcase down and wiping perspiration off her forehead. She had to resist an urge to pull off the heavy coat for a feeling of coolness against her skin. That body heat that now bothered her was exactly what she needed to maintain her life, she knew, and the blast of frigid air that would hit her when she stripped might very well give her the pneumonia that both of them feared.

"Two things," he said.

"Full of ideas, aren't we."

"Don't congratulate me until you hear how unpleasant both of the possibilities are."

"They couldn't be any more unpleasant than waiting here until we either freeze or get caught."

"Well," he said, wishing he could drop the rucksacks but knowing if he did he would never put them on again, "we can either turn back, climb the other side of the ravine, cross to another way down the first mountain, and make a second attempt at getting off it, then work our way back in the direction we want to go. The flaw is that we may run into the same thing—or something worse no matter where we go. And it's still snowing—which means every hour we delay getting on our way, there's another inch of snow we have to push through."

"Sounds bad."

"I don't like it either."

"The second way, then."

He frowned. "We break a way through the drift hanging over us, go right through and on our way."

"It looks seven or eight feet deep, anyway. We don't have a shovel, and even if we did we couldn't use it properly from a slope like this."

"We *do* have Proteus," he said.

She grinned. "Of course! The weapons!"

"Don't get too excited, love. There's a hazard. Proteus will refuse to get more than a few feet from me, which means we'll have to be right where he's working. And since his range of fire isn't great enough to work from the bottom of the ravine or the other side, we'll have to stand about halfway up the slope while he blasts away. If there's a slide, we're going to be right in the path of it."

They both looked at the shelf of white above them. "What if he uses the vibra-beam instead of the projectile weapon?" she asked.

"I can't direct that one. It's an automatic system at his discretion, just like the plasti-plasma tentacles. But the projectile business responds to vocal commands. It's all we have."

"Slide or not," she said, "we might as well try it."

"Gun left," he ordered the robot.

It extruded the barrel from the smooth sheen of its hull.

"Gun up," he directed.

It complied.

"Fraction left. Fraction left again. Steady."

He looked once more at the shelf of snow that was suspended overhead.

Somewhere behind, a wolf howled.

"Fire one!" he ordered.

The shell exploded in the middle of the drift, blasted snow in all directions, sent a fine white mist rolling down the ravine and across them. When the air cleared, approximately a third of the way had been torn open.

"Gun up, fraction," he directed. "Up fraction again. Fire one!"

The shell exploded, and there was a screeching, whining rumble from above. Cracks appeared in the crusted drift. It jerked, seemed to descend, in mass, an inch or so. Then everything let loose with an horrendous roar and the entire snow shelf swept at them with the speed of a locomotive.

Davis grabbed Leah, tried to leap with her up the slope toward the avalanche, with the intention of reaching the cleared section where there was little snow left to fall. But before he could get there, the wave of cold snow and ice swept over them, pulled her from his grasp and carried her away, toward the bottom of the small valley...



## *Chapter Seven*

He managed to grasp the trunk of a thin, sturdy, yil tree—past which the rushing snow carried him—wrapped his arms around it and locked his hands together on the other side. The tree bent amazingly beneath the pressure of the small avalanche though it refused to snap. In a moment, the roar seemed to grow distant, as if he were hearing only echoes of the event, then abruptly ceased altogether. He rose, his legs shaky beneath him, and tried to get his breath and to still the fluttering of his heart. The air was so choked with mist that it was difficult to breathe, and he thought it would not be improbable for a man with an impaired lung or a cold and its subsequent stuffed nose to either drown or suffocate in seconds.

He wiped the dewy vapor from his face, squinted his eyes and tried to see through the water droplets that immediately beaded his eyelashes. There was a dense cloud of snow eddying in the air currents in the valley bottom, a couple of hundred feet below, and it effectively shielded anything down there from his vision.

Wiping his face once more, he stumbled foward, grabbing trees and shattered saplings for handholds, slipping, crashing into rock formations and yil trunks with his hips, but somehow managing not to fall. He was breathing well enough now that the vapor had begun to settle, but his heart still thumped wildly in his chest. He had recalled the dream he had had only a couple of hours before in which he had been imprisoned in a house of ice and Leah had come to release him by melting the walls down—and how she, in turn, had been led away, appropriated by the Alliance soldier without a face...

If she were dead, in this avalanche, it would be as much the Alliance's fault as if a blue suited, brass buttoned officer had come and taken her and shot her...

No. No, he had to face up to the fact that some of the blame would lie with him. He should have tied her to a tree, tied both of them firmly, to protect against the possibility of an avalanche. Never before in his life had there been another human being for which he had felt responsible. It had always been him, alone, against the world, and any cuts or wounds incurred were marks of pride to satisfy the sadistic trait in him. Now the "me" was "us" as he had been reminding himself ever since that day in the temple, in the corridors of God's mind, when the point of no return had been reached and passed at blinding speeds. And while one half of "us" was rather big and brutish and able to take care of itself, the other half was frail, light, and in need of help when the forces of the opposition were very large.

He cursed his mother and, to a lesser degree but still vehemently, his father. If they had been reasonable, open human beings instead of ego-bloated back-biters, perhaps he would have learned the concept of "us" when he should have, in his childhood. But from the very first days, when he saw that

one or the other only took his side in order to goad the one who disagreed with him, he had realized it was Stauffer against them, Stauffer in the singular. Because of them and the lateness with which he had come to the discovery of love and the responsibilities it carried with it, he might very well have made a mistake in judgment that would cost him the other half of "us." And so soon, before he had even had time to explore all the possibilities of the amplified self that now included this winged Demosian girl...

"Leah!" he shouted as he reached the edge of the wall of snow.

Silence. Except for the faint sigh of the wind.

"Leah!"

"Here," she called half-heartily, thirty feet to the right and forty feet behind. She had been brought up against the thick base of an enormous, black-barked tree and had not suffered the ride clear to the bottom. She was struggling to get out of the imprisoning snow, but with little luck.

He started after her at a run, fell, cracked his head on a bared section of stony ground, got up a little dizzy. By the time he reached her she was half to her feet, and he had her clear of the mounds in seconds. He drew her to him, nearly crushed her, despite the padding of her survival coat. He wanted to say very many things, but there were not really words to frame them. They were emotions, formless thoughts of happiness. Instead, he kissed her and stood back to look her over. "In one piece?"

"No broken bones. Though I guess I'll ache pretty terribly by tomorrow."

"An ache can be borne. I don't know quite how we'd handle a broken leg or something like that. The speedheal doesn't have the facilities."

She turned and looked up at the top of the ridge. "Well, we've broken through right enough."

"And if anyone is on the trail," he said, "that should bring them running. Come on, let's get a move on."

"The suitcase," she protested. "It has the blanket and the plastic in it."

He looked at the tons of snow at the bottom of the ravine. "We'd never find it, even if we had days to look. We'll just have to make do with what we have."

"Not down there," she protested. "I held onto it until after I was stopped by the tree. It's in this mound, right here somewhere."

He looked up to the point where they had stood, where the slide had struck them. "You held on to that heavy case all the way down?"

"I knew, if we lost it, we'd not have any heat when we slept and that would mean the end of it. Right?" She looked so serious and yet so elfin at the same time that he burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You. I had my rucksacks strapped on, and they were very nearly ripped off me. Yet you had presence of mind enough to clutch that damned suitcase and make it stay with you. Lady, remind me never to challenge you to a fist fight."

The suitcase was near the surface, and they uncovered it in a few minutes. It had been dented when it struck the tree, but was otherwise undamaged. When Davis started up the hill with it, she insisted he let her take it. He tried to argue, realized that would lead him nowhere, and finally let her have it.

"Now, dammit, let's get going," he said, grasping her elbow and helping her up the side of the ravine toward the top which was no longer drifted shut.

Proteus came behind. His plasti-plasma was gurgling quite a bit, and his cataracted sight sensors swiveled and twisted, as if something like the avalanche might strike again.

But something worse happened.

"What are they?" Leah asked as they pulled themselves onto level ground and began walking across the short table of the mountaintop.

Paralleling them to their right were three blue spheres, each as large as a one-man plane, painted with flat light-absorbing paint that did not gleam or reflect the slightest minim of dim sunlight. Even as he watched, they arced, changed course, angled in toward he and Leah. There were no men inside them, he knew, but that did not make the situation the least bit better for them.

"Sherlock robots," he explained, watching the advancing balls of blue with fascination. "They must have brought them in and set them loose before dawn. I wouldn't have thought a backwoods world like this would have any. They most likely released them at three different locations. They've been closing in on us all night, coming toward one another as their data was correlated, shared, and factored. They've got the most sophisticated tracking gear the Alliance possesses, all microminiaturized and stuffed in that shell. You can't escape one of them."

"How do they kill?" she asked gloomily, her large, oval eyes fixed to the middle of the trio of globes.

"They don't. But don't look relieved about that. They're just as deadly as if they were killers. But with heat sensors, sound sensors, visual apparatus, infrared scanners, encephalographic trackers, and a complete library of card

indices on every public act you and I have engaged in, they have no room for weapons. But they've certainly already radioed our position back to the Alliance soldiers. You can expect a squadron of police to be dropped in here within minutes—if the weather isn't too bad to permit that."

The Sherlocks slowed.

The snow continued to fall.

"What do we do?" Leah asked. "Just wait to be picked up?"





## *Chapter Eight*

He did feel standing there with the wind whipping his coat tightly against his legs—with the weight of their supplies on his shoulders, with his nerves still unquieted from the near disaster of the snowslide—like doing nothing heroic, like waiting for them and going with them as meekly as they could possibly desire, letting them do to him whatever they wished. But he reminded himself that such thinking was selfish and that "us" should not be ignored in a rush to consider the bone-aching exhaustion and the desire for rest and peace that plagued "me." With so many miles left to go before they would reach Tooth, their chances for survival were slim. How much easier and less painful it would be to die under the guns of the Alliance soldiers than under the sapping wind and cold of Demos's winter.

Intellectually, he was aware that the death wish that now flirted about the back of his mind was a holdover from earlier days, from those dark hours in his childhood when he found rebuff from both parents and turned to his books for solace given second-hand where none of first-hand nature was obtainable. He read books of stories about the supernatural, of demons and devils, angels and spirits. In those days, it seemed as if it would be so much more bearable to be dead, to inhabit the regions of the netherworld creatures where odd and magical things transpired and where there were no great emotional tangles that made you sick deep in your stomach, no fights and scoldings that made you shake like an old man with the ague.

But he was no longer a child.

And there was solace to be had in this world, in the land of the living. If only he could keep both of them alive long enough to enjoy it and strengthen the bond of affection that joined them, he might eventually learn to stand up to adverse conditions without hesitation, without first falling back on the deathwish and the easy way out of a bad position.

"Gun forward!" he directed Proteus. "Fire one!"

The projectile struck the center Sherlock, tearing the delicate and complex machine into thousands of whirling, twisted pieces of junk. Now he had added yet another crime to his string of punishable acts on his record: willfully destroying a major piece of Alliance property. He wondered how many years that carried with it, and he felt an elation rise in him the likes of which he had not felt since he was a boy and had secretly violated one of the many rules his mother or father laid down for him.

The other two detection robots curved away to avoid the same fate, but he shouted for Proteus to track the one on the right and fire when on target. He was rewarded with a flash of green-blue light as the casing of the second Sherlock split and poured forth a long stream of mechanical guts.

He turned to look for the third of the devices, but he could not locate it. "Damn!" he snapped.

"It disappeared between the trunks of those trees, straight ahead," she said.

"Let's go. It'll have to follow us. Maybe, if we make it move, we'll get a look at it."

They struck out for the trees, moving as swiftly as the terrain and the weather permitted. Proteus floated ahead of them, watchful of the deep shadows through which they must pass. Now that the Sherlocks had been identified by Davis as enemies, the protection robot would be constantly alert until the third device had been demolished. It did not withdraw its projectile weapons barrel through its flawless shell but maintained it in firing position as it scanned the woods with all of its senses. It was more likely to have luck finding the Sherlock than it would have had finding a man under the same conditions, for the Alliance detection system would be radiating leaked power plus the traceable sensor emanations of its multiple tracking facilities. By the virtue of the very same instruments it used to keep touch of them, Proteus could keep *its* position known.

They entered the copse of trees and weaved between the smooth boles, following the path of some mountain deer herd which had passed this way and provided an easier thoroughfare than they had been used to in the last several hours.

"It only takes one of them, doesn't it?" Leah asked, marching along behind him, bent a little to accommodate the weight of the suitcase.

"What?" he asked, not looking back. There wasn't any time to look back now.

"One Sherlock. To let them know where we are."

"That's right."

"Then, no matter how fast we walk, no matter how far we go before they can get police on the mountain, they'll still have us pinpointed?"

"Proteus will find it and destroy it, eventually."

"But until he does, shouldn't we take one of these other trails that cross this one every once and a while? If we moved in the wrong direction, and we make a few thousand feet before Proteus can destroy the Sherlock, then they will be left with the wrong fix on us as their last bit of data. As soon as the Sherlock is finished, we backtrack, pick up this path again, and go the way we really want to go."

He stopped so suddenly that she almost walked into the back of him, and

when he turned around, her face was nearly up against his chest. He kissed her nose, said, "How come you're smarter than me?"

"I'm not."

"You've proven it a couple of times now."

"It's just that you've never been in a war. You don't understand about things like this as well as I do. You'll learn." She said it with such sincerity that he was forced to laugh again, though the situation certainly did not merit mirth.

"There's a cross trail just ahead," he said. "Left or right?"

"Doesn't matter. Maybe right, since we'll be bearing just slightly to the left when we start down the other side of this mountain."

"Let's go," he said, leading the way, taking the right turn and striking off on the false trail. He just hoped Proteus would locate the Sherlock and destroy it in time to let them get back to the right trail and make some distance on it before the blue uniformed boys arrived.

Proteus's plasti-plasma gurgled.

It seemed an interminable time that they walked, though he knew it could not have been more than three or four minutes. But each step away from the trail they intended to regain seemed like a step into a swamp from which there was no egress—a swamp lined, beneath the brackish water, with quicksand. He even fantasized, for a moment, that the Sherlock might be quite aware of their plan and only leading them on long enough for the soldiers to arrive. But that was hogwash, for the Sherlock could not think, not even as much as Proteus. It was a densely packed shell of seeking equipment, nothing more. It was a game machine, a very clever one at that, but not a man.

Still, it would not show itself. At least, not visually. He wished there were some way he could know if Proteus had it spotted. He remembered having often pondered the simplicity of being a machine, of seeing the world in black and white, in quantities of good and bad without shades of gray in the middle. Now he realized a few other values in a machine's existence. There was no fear, no worry. No anxiety—and therefore no urgency. He wished there were some way to make Proteus aware of the value of these ticking seconds that slipped by them so terribly fast.

The projectile weapon made a whoofing noise as Proteus blasted at something almost directly ahead, through the trees. There was an explosion, light and smoke, then silence.

"He got it!" Leah cried.

"Let's see before we celebrate," he said, rushing forward to the spot where the projectile had struck. There, steaming in the snow, melting hollows in it, were dozens of chunks of the blue-husked Sherlock.

Leah dropped the suitcase and slapped her hands against her bulkily clothed hips, laughing much as he had seen the other Demosian girls laughing when they had been playing games with the mythical demons in the forest back at the Sanctuary. He was intrigued by the way these people could mix joy and humor with the direst of events, the manner in which they never lost track of the things that should be appreciated in life no matter how many tons of dross and ugliness those nuggets were buried under.

"Fast now," he urged, turning and pushing past her to lead the way back to the other trail. "They'll be here in moments if they've taken a chance of sending a copter up in this storm."

They gained the first herd path in two minutes, moving at a trot. When they got there, he insisted taking the suitcase from her was the wisest course, since—for a short period anyway—he could run faster with it than she could and, without it, she would be able to keep up. She did not argue this time, perfectly aware of the urgency involved and the truth of it. She was, just as she said, a good soldier. Had it been better for her to struggle with the luggage, she would have refused; but seeing the wisdom of his suggestion, she complied.

Time passed much too quickly for comfort.

There was no sound but the wind, the rattling of the branches overhead, and the squeak of their feet in the snow.

He estimated their remaining time before the arrival of the troops at a little more than five minutes. He tried counting seconds as they ran, but he lost track so often that he gave it up and concentrated on moving just a few feet per minute faster than they already were.

For a time, it seemed as if they were the only living beings in all the world, two figures in a landscape without purpose and without meaning. All other things were inanimate: cold, snow, sky, earth, stark trees, strangely stilled wind...

It was a tomb planet, a dead world, and they were rodents scurrying through its corridors and chambers in search of some exit that would lead them into life.

The thing which made them run so fast was the knowledge that they might soon cease to be rodents and become two more corpses to inhabit the cells of the tomb.

Then, with the swiftness of a sleepwalker stepping on a nail, the world

came awake with a thundering explosion of sound. The sky was filled with the chatter of the blades of an aircraft whose flight pattern was too high for grav plates to be of any use—a staccato barrage like machine guns from some ancient period of man's history. The forest took up the sharp call and threw the clatter of the big engines back at the low clouds.

"Hurry," Davis said as they reached the edge of the mountain flatland and began to descend another treacherous slope toward the long bowl of the valley through which they would be walking for the next four or five hours, if Leah was not confused about the way to the Tooth.

"Let me have the suitcase," she said.

"Never mind that."

"You can't brace yourself with two rucksacks and the suitcase on uneven ground. You know that as well as I do. Now quit arguing and hurry it!"

He set the case down without stopping, merely slowing his pace for a moment, heard her grapple with it, heft it and bring it after him. He worked from tree to tree down the sheet-white land beneath the bare trees, his eyes on the skies that could be seen through the crosshatch of limbs more often than they were focused on the terrain ahead.

She followed.

When they were halfway down, the police copter rushed by overhead, oblivious of them as it sped toward the spot the Sherlock had last pinpointed them. Under its belly was the "A" of the Alliance, ringed with the circle of green worlds that was the government symbol. Then it was gone, and its hoarse voice diminished as it put distance between itself and the very fugitives it was seeking.

"How long until they know?" she asked when they reached the floor of the valley.

"Not long."

"I thought so."

"Well," he said, "we're on the level for a good while. We can make time easy enough."

"But if they discover we've struck for the valley and decide we're still in it, it'll be no trouble for them to pen us in and use a search party to net us from all sides."

He leaned against a jutting tower of granite which was encased in ice, took some snow in his mouth and allowed it to melt before swallowing. "That's

true enough. But this is the only route, isn't it?"

"The only one we could possibly stand up to."

"We could give up the fortress idea."

"And go where?" He shrugged.

"You take the suitcase a while," she said. "We're on the level again, and it won't be too hard for you. My arms ache."

He took the luggage without comment, turned back to the trail and started forward at a very brisk walk. Several hours away, at the other end of the lowland, he could see the pass through which they must go to eventually reach Tooth and the fortress—if there was a fortress. If the Alliance had been too sure of itself to send more Sherlocks along with those police, then he and Leah might make that pass and, perhaps, even Tooth Mountain. If the government was, on the other hand, hedging all corners of their bet, this was the place in which both of them would die...

He found a stream, a seven-foot-wide span of water which was mostly frozen over by a thin crust of ice. It was almost certain that the stream ran down the center of the valley, from one end to another, following a fairly straight line, and it would therefore provide the shortest route to the pass. He paralleled it religiously, walking on its banks most of the time, except for one stretch where it cut deeper into the land and formed small cliffs to either side where thick, thorny brambles grew—their bite unsoothed by the white garb of winter they wore.

They were more than halfway across the depression, within an hour or so of the pass, when Leah grabbed his arm and yanked on it for him to stop. When he turned, she held a finger to her lips and said: "Listen."

At first, all he could hear was the rush of air in and out of his own lungs and the roar of blood through his temples. Then the thing she wanted him to hear impressed itself above these sounds: a chattering—like copter blades. He tilted his head, searched the air for another piece of the noise, caught it again, closer this time. It was coming fast...

"Quick!" he gasped, grabbing her and pulling her backwards, off the bare earth along the banks of the stream, into the trees and brush.

"The suitcase!" she said.

He had set it down when she stopped him and had forgotten to bring it into concealment with them. It stood on the bank, looking a dozen times larger than it really was, a monument to his stupidity.

He looked anxiously at the gray sky, the falling snow, back the way they

had come. There was no sign of the copter, though the noise of its engines and the roar of its blades grew closer and closer. He stood, took a step toward the suitcase, and caught sight of the aircraft coming across the tops of the trees five hundred yards away!

He fell, crashing into the brush, pressing desperately down into the shadows there. He felt thorns prick through his gloves, gouge his cheeks. There was a warm flush on his face, and he knew that he was bleeding a little. That didn't bother him as it once would have. He was no longer thinking about the handsome image he must present to fans. He was thinking, instead, about winning this hard-played game to salvage his life. And hers. His survival instinct had always worked well on an intellectual level, for he had been able to save his sanity from his parents even as a child. But now, in this last day, that instinct was functioning on a physical plane as well; and he was pleased enough of that development to feel a surge of pride and delight as the Alliance copter swept overhead without slowing, without spotting the suitcase.

"Are you all right?" Leah asked.

He got to his knees, pulled a thorn from the edge of his lip, wiped his face, looked at his blood-smeared hand. "It looks worse than it is. I was just lucky not to collect one in the eye."

"What are they doing?"

He looked to the pass, saw the Alliance copter taking up position at the way between the mountains. Directly beneath the place where it hovered, the ribbon of this stream tumbled down over gray rocks.

"They know we're in the valley," he said. "They're waiting for us to come out."

"Then they must have police coming in at the other end."

He looked back the way they had come, listened. He thought he detected the sound of a second copter, somewhere back along the stream. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Through the pass. Maybe we can find some way to sneak past the copter."

"They'll have men on the ground at that end, won't they?"

"Maybe. But we can't just sit here and wait. And it's easier to go ahead than to double back and try to slip through the search line. They're bound to have hand tracking units, heat sensors. Maybe not anything nearly as sophisticated as Sherlocks, but something good enough to keep us from passing them unnoticed."



"I'll take the suitcase a while," she said, pushing past him, through the brush, and grabbing the supplies.

"Maybe we should leave it here."

"And let them find it so they know we're running scared."

"They must know that already."

"And so they're certain we haven't left the valley yet?"

"And they must know that too."

"I'll carry it anyway," she said. "Break a trail."

He moved off, staying beneath the trees now, though maintaining their proximity to the stream so that there was no danger of their getting lost. He kept them out of sight of the copter dancing on the air at the end of the valley, though they caught glimpses of it now and then when they were forced to dash across an open stretch of land where they felt painfully unprotected in the white spotlessness of the virgin snow.

The light was slowly beginning to leave the sky when they were near to the end of the valley. For the last half hour, the land had sloped upward, growing steeper and steeper, and their spirits had lifted with it. There had been no encounter with the searchers and, except for the area of the stream itself, the pass was thickly treed, providing heavy cover for them to slip through the net of their captors. A thousand feet from the brink of the valley and a reprieve from the from the pressure the Alliance had put on them, Davis called a halt so that they might gather energies for the last leg of the assault and so that he could reconnoiter to see if things were going to be as simple as they seemed.

They were not.

He had left Leah and gone only a third of the way up the slope, slipping quietly from tree to tree, when he saw the sentries stationed only a dozen feet down from the top of the ridge. They were stooped so that they could not be silhouetted against the sky, and each of them cradled a rifle across his knees. They peered intently downward, and he realized that, if the valley had not been slightly darker than the top of the ridge in these last minutes of daylight, they would be able to see him as he now saw them. They were no more than five feet apart. If that spacing had been maintained across the entire width of the pass, there must be a hundred and fifty men in the line. Which meant there had been other helicopters involved in the operation and that the men had been brought up from the other side of the pass. It seemed as if the entire mountain range had been blanketed by the Alliance. It pleased him to know that they considered the two of them important game. But he supposed any totalitarian government must go to great extremes to punish each and every

violator of its dictums, lest one man who escapes their wrath becomes a symbol of rebellion for the masses.

Carefully, so as to make not the slightest sound or present even the slightest movement to the sentries, he worked his way back through the brush and the snow to Leah. He noticed, as he moved, that the wind had picked up, even though the snow had stopped, and that the disturbances he caused in the landscape were fairly swiftly eradicated by the brisk air.

"Well?" she said when he returned.

"We can't get through."

"I have bad news too," she said.

"What?"

"See that clearing half a mile down in the valley?"

He nodded.

"A moment ago, a line of searchers moved through it, each only a few feet away from the other. They must have been in the woods to either side of the clearing with the same distance between them. Every other man carried a short-range heat sensor and was fanning it in front of him."

He looked at the now empty clearing in the fading light below. "They'll be here in half an hour."

"Less. They were walking rather fast."



## *Chapter Nine*

Davis finished digging the snug cave into the drift and said, "Hand me the blanket." When she passed the coverlet to him, he pushed it to the back of the snow-walled chamber without unfolding it, examined his handiwork once again, then turned around, smiling. "It's all done and looks like it won't cave in on us. We ought to have even a few minutes to spare to give the wind a chance to erase our tracks."

"Proteus," she reminded him.

He turned to the hovering protection robot, reluctant to make this final move. He had come to depend on the presence of a mechanical bodyguard, and there was something almost sacrilegious—something taboo—about shutting it down without having a temporary replacement. But when he looked down the slope and saw the lamps of the soldiers who were beating the brush for them, lamps lighted only moments earlier, not even five minutes away now, he reached out, thumbed the stud that opened Proteus's sliding access panel, and quickly cycled down the machine's systems with one toggle control until it was totally inactive except for its grav plates, which damped slowly to a complete shutoff, letting the sphere settle softly to the ground without sustaining damage. None of the sensors nodes gleamed from without or within. For the first time in nearly three years, Proteus was "asleep."

Davis hefted the sphere, pushed it through the narrow tunnel that led into the snow cave, shoved it to the far end of the small chamber. Leah went through next, disappearing from sight, and he brought up the tail end after taking a final look at the approaching, irresistible line of lights that bisected the valley floor. Inside, he required two minutes of hasty work to block off the entrance with snow which had been piled in the entrance tunnel for that purpose. He knew the seal must be clumsily obvious from outside, a blotch on the smooth sweep of the remainder of the drift, but he could do nothing more but trust to the now rather stiff and persistent winds and the whipping clouds of fine, dry snow to conceal his labors as well as the majority of their footprints.

Inside the igloolike dwelling, the air was relatively warm, for there was no wind at all, and what little body heat did escape them was contained in the small area that had been carved out of the white stuff. Snow proved such a good insulator, against even the slightest draft, that he wondered why he had not thought of this the first night out rather than erecting the flimsy and dangerous lean-to. He supposed it was because the survival instinct had not yet bloomed from the bud he had then possessed.

They sat, quietly, shoulder to shoulder with Proteus at their feet, still and mute.

They could hear a faint wind.

As yet, nothing more.

Davis felt as if they were mice, huddled there in the darkness, anxiously waiting for the cats to pass by and leave them so they might resume life as normal mice should live it. And, like the mouse in his wall nest, he felt as much relieved as afraid. There was at least two, and possibly three feet of snow on every side of them except one. Snow would either hold their body heat within the little room he had excavated or filter the warm air into coolness before it reached the world outside. On the one side where there was no snow, the back of the chamber, there was a rock wall, which should certainly prevent the emanations of bodily heat from reaching the delicate sensors of the thermal detectors carried by the Alliance troops. If things worked as they planned, as they thought they should, the searchers would stomp right by them and collide with the sentries at the top of the ridge. They would then conclude that their quarry had somehow gotten through the pass—either before the line of sentries had been posted or in the first moments of the watch when the soldiers' attentions were not as sharp as they should have been. Excuses would be made, heads would roll, but at least he and Leah would get by unscathed.

He hoped.

"Have they gone by and—" she began.

He shushed her.

Outside, the faint sound of footsteps, breathing, and a few muttered commands passed as if down a line in chain communication, echoed in the night and found their way through the shell of the snow cave.

Davis sat very still, as if the slightest movement might cause the drift in which they hid to collapse and blow away on the wind, leaving them exposed and defenseless.

The voices faded; the footsteps faded; the breathing sounds were gone...

The wind replaced all of them.

"I think it worked," she whispered.

"Let's wait," he said.

The time went by so slowly that he felt he was going to have to scream to get it moving again. He remembered how, when he was hollowing out the drift to make a place to hide, the minutes went by so rapidly. If time were not only so subjective, but objective as well, maybe a man would not have so much trouble in life!

Then the sound of footsteps came again.

They were slower, more purposeful, and accompanied by commands shouted by the officers to search into the trees as well as to all sides. Every few steps there was a commanded halt when, Davis imagined, every rock and snowflake received an intimate scrutiny. He wondered whether the wind had done its job well enough to allow the seal to their snow chamber to pass that close investigation.

Then the footsteps drew even with them and another halt-and-examine period was called for.

Leah took his hand, snuggled against him.

Time passed.

He wondered how quickly he could activate Proteus and get him working, then remembered that Proteus could not be used against other men, even if they did mean you harm.

"Advance!" a voice called. Immediately, the line walked several more paces, past the entrance to their hideout before stopping for another examination of the terrain immediately before it. They were safe. The command had ordered a second search of the valley, had sent tired men back to tackle an even more tiring chore than that which they had just finished. And both times, their dugout had withstood scrutiny and had not aroused any suspicions.

He was about to turn to Leah to ask what they could do to celebrate the occasion and still remain inside a cramped hole inside a hollow snowdrift on top of a mountain, in subzero weather—but he heard her light, fluttering snore and discovered she had fallen asleep even as the line had been passing them. He shook his head, chuckled, unable to envision the sort of steel nerves that would have allowed sleep at a moment like that, even if sleep was so terribly in need.

Gently, he unfolded the heat radiating blanket, pulled it around them, aligned the heat makers, and settled down for a night's rest. It was very likely that the Alliance would hang around through the earliest of the daylight hours, just to check the place over one more time, in full light, before admitting the fugitives had slipped through their grasp. But if the entrance seal had been sufficiently covered now, it would even be more obscured in the morning. By tomorrow afternoon, they should be able to break out, rested and fed, and continue the journey. There was the possibility that they could find themselves coming up on the tail end of the Alliance search party, which would now be ahead of them; but as long as they stayed in territory the troops had thoroughly searched, they were safe. And then there was the chance...

... sleep found him in the middle of the thought.

It was a dreamless night until, near wakefulness, he began to have a

nightmare in which he was caught by Alliance troops, shackled and led away to be turned over to the rep who had promised to destroy him. In the port city, he was taken down into dungeons beneath the gray block building of the government headquarters and chained to a wall where he was beaten, severely, again and again by an assortment of guards. Then the rep had him transferred to a cot where he was tightly lashed, and the ancient Chinese water torture was applied. Drop by drop, the liquid splashed on his forehead, ran down his face and neck. The sound of it grew from an almost inaudible tick to a resounding, crashing boom that was driving him insane. All the while, he marveled at the effectiveness of so ancient and simple a torture in a time when science and man were so developed and sophisticated. It seemed anachronistic. But it worked. Drop... by... drop... booming... on his... head... head... head... He felt his mind beginning to go, and he screamed—which awakened him.

The scream he had bellowed in the nightmare issued as a faint croak in his throat in the reality of the morning on Demos. But a piece of the nightmare persisted. The water continued to drop on his head. From a white ceiling, a steady, quick rhythmically timed series of water droplets fell to explode on the bridge of his nose. For a moment, he could not imagine where he was and what the dripping water could mean. Then a section of the snow ceiling, about as large as his hand, fell directly onto his face, a cold mass of slush that remedied his disorientation and woke him fully.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he sat up as if he had been propelled by a spring mechanism. The melted spot above his head was not the only breach of the shelter. There was a second hole past his shoulder where another column of hot air had worked its way through, and there were four places whose thinness was apparent from the amount of light that passed through and flushed into the cavelet. In a very little while, their sanctuary would cease to exist.

The disaster had been unavoidable. They would have frozen to death without the heat blanket, even with the body heat that would have collected in the tiny room. Yet the heavy amount of heat produced by the device was bound to be more than the snow could filter to coolness without, itself, being melted. Unavoidable, yes. A surprise, no. He should have thought of it, should have tried to arrange some method of waking in the middle of the night to turn it off, to give the crystalline walls of their dugout a chance to recuperate. He had been tired and had given in to the urge to consider the victory last night a final victory—when he knew perfectly well it could only be temporary. The Alliance was never going to give up that easily.

He sat there, very tense, waiting for the sound of a soldier, waiting for the startled exclamation of discovery and the shout of triumph. But when, after a long while, he heard nothing, he pulled up the sleeve of his coat and checked the time. It was already past midday. The soldiers would have had sufficient time, starting at dawn, to comb the valley again. They were gone by now, surely.

He tickled Leah's nose until she finally lifted an eyelid to stare at him sleepily with an expression that said she had not decided whether to kiss him or pulverize him. "They're gone," he informed her.

She sat up, yawning. "For now."

"I'm supposed to be the pessimist here."

"You've infected me, then," she said, smiling thinly.

They had a breakfast of vitamin paste, chocolate, stew, and water. Though that was not the most agreeable combination to put into their stomachs and begin the day on, they both agreed that every bite of everything had tasted like something they might have purchased in a delicacy shop. After toilet duties had been finished with, and they had exercised their cramped and aching muscles thoroughly enough to dare to put them to the torture of more walking and climbing, they made their way up the last thousand feet of the ridge, to the brink of the valley which had been so heavily guarded last night and was now so lonely and bleak.

They looked back the way they had come, to the mountain they had crossed the day before. Three helicopters fluttered around the tops of the yil trees on that last mountain, and from the flurry of hoisting and lowering, it appeared the search had been shifted to this area and that a good number of ground troops were involved. Such a fortuitous decision would never have been made by the Alliance if Davis had prayed for it, he was certain. But without hope, their luck had changed for the better, and the enemy was off on some wild goose extravaganza behind them. Perhaps they would make Tooth after all.

They turned, went down the other side of the ridge, out of the forest into a clearing three hundred yards across which broke between two arms of the heavy woods. The sky was only partially clouded, and bits of sun shone down on them, making their faces warm as they walked. They moved briskly, though they knew the enemy was far behind, for they had become accustomed to moving in shadows and felt oddly as if they were on a stage when out in the open. They did not have to worry about leaving prints, for the troops and helicopters which must have been here until just a short while ago had destroyed the smooth blanket of windblown snow.

Halfway across, Davis saw something which did not *seem* right, though he could not pinpoint what it was. He carefully examined the area of the approaching woods which he had been watching when the feeling of uneasiness had descended over him, and saw it again, in a patch of brush: the gleam of sunlight on glass or metal...

"Veer left," he said.

She asked no questions, but did exactly as he instructed.



"Walk as fast as you can, but don't break into a run."

The moment their pace picked up, the camouflage net dropped away from the one-man scout copter which had been on sentry duty, and the machine kicked its rotors on, danced off the ground, and sped toward them, the sound of its blades cracking in sharp echo on the open basin between the trees.

"Run!" he shouted, grabbing the suitcase and wrenching it from her. He knew the copter pilot had radioed the other Alliance aircraft that he had found the fugitives and that the area of search would be hot on their trail in minutes. He also knew, with a certain dread, that though the Alliance might want to take them alive, this pilot probably also had orders to kill if they seemed about to gain the next strip of woodland before the other copters could arrive. They would not have the slightest idea how the two of them had hidden in a valley searched two or three times with thermal tracking units, and they would not want to give them a second chance to use the same trick.

"Run! Run!" he shouted to her as she lagged behind him by half a dozen paces.

The woods looked so far away.

The first stutter of gunfire burst from the one-man copter and tore into the ground fifteen feet behind them.



## *Chapter Ten*

"Faster!" Davis shouted.

She stumbled and went down.

The copter swept overhead, its landing skis no more than six feet above them as it passed. The deafening, chaotic explosion of its blades ate into Davis's bones and made him feel as if he were in a great blender, being spun around the walls.

He ran back to her, helped her up, cradled her in his arm and, half dragging, half carrying her, he ran for the trees and the safety they offered, no matter how short-lived that safety would be when the ground forces and the other three copters arrived.

The one-man craft arced, doubled back, fluttered in toward them, the sun opaquing its glass-bubble cockpit and giving it the look of mercury. The pilot banked, bringing the side-mounted machine gun into the proper angle, and let off another burst of shells.

Davis was spun around and sent crashing head over heels with Leah in his arm. For a short, horrible moment, he was certain he had been hit in the arm, for it was numb. But he saw there was no blood... And he saw that the suitcase had been hit, taking the full brunt of the bullets. It was torn up the middle, and everything it had held was shredded and spilled across the snow: the plastic with which the lean-to could be made, the heat blanket which was their only protection against the stinging, awful cold of the night...

"He's coming back!" Leah shouted, struggling to her feet, trying to help him up.

He gained his feet, grabbed her with his numbed arm, and ran, wondering how they would survive another night without the warmth of the blanket, wondering if it might not be better for both of them to just stop and offer themselves to the pilot of the little craft, open their arms and get it over with in the quick bite of the bullets.

The copter passed, spraying the ground immediately ahead of them with heavy fire.

Davis stumbled and went down in his urgency to keep from running into the death zone. Lying there, trying to get up, he realized that the pilot could have killed them easily before this, that he was trying to see if he couldn't contain them, slow them from the woods until the others had arrived to take them alive. And he was doing very well at that. Only seconds could remain until ground troops would be arriving.

He stopped trying to reach his feet, told Leah to be still, and fumbled the pistol out of his holster. He laid on the ground, as if he were too weak to continue, and waited for the copter to make another pass. He did not know if he could manage what he was about to do, but he had to try. A moment later, the glass-bubble cockpit swept at them, tilted so the pilot could get a good look. He was grinning, and his finger was on the trigger for his gun.

Had Davis misjudged? Was the pilot just playing with them, tiring them and then killing them like a cat does with a mouse, without any concern about when the ground forces would arrive in the other copters? There was no doubt at all in his mind that the man in that control seat was a sadist. No other sort of man could have that expression with his finger on the trigger of a deadly weapon.

He rolled, brought up the pistol, and fired two rounds into the glass of the machine, directly at the man in the chair. The sharp sound of the gun sounded unrealistic.

The copter pulled up, passed over them, stalled, and spiraled into the earth a hundred yards away. It burst into orange and blue flames that stopped the gurgled scream of the pilot before he and Leah had reached the trees that had been their goal.

"The blanket!" she said when they were in the cool shadows of the trees.

"It was shredded. Useless. The radiators wouldn't work even if there was enough of it to crawl under. We've got to make time."

In the distance, the sound of approaching aircraft...

"Now!" he hissed.

She followed him into the trees, along another herd path. Without the suitcase they made far better time, for she was easily able to keep up with whatever pace he set as long as the ground was flat and relatively easy-going. They had gone perhaps five hundred yards when one of the huge Alliance copters, a troop carrier, shuddered by, just above tree level. Davis looked up, afraid he might see the hoist lowering armed men, but the worry was unfounded. He bent his head and concentrated on making time. He hoped the craft was not planning on depositing a crew somewhere ahead and letting the fugitives collide with them.

Even though the machine could not attack other men, Davis was pleased to see Proteus floating twenty feet ahead, hull gleaming, marked in one spot by the dark crease of a bullet that had been fired from the one-man copter back on the open field. As long as Proteus was nearby, Davis could remain sane. As children had security blankets which were of no use to ward off their enemies but which still gave them comfort, so he had his protection robot which could not do him any good in the battle in which he was now engaged

but which still provided solace because of its past associations with triumph over death and danger.

Then the forest flared crimson...

There was a wash of flame, like liquid, bursting through the trees across their path, sweeping over Proteus.

And there was sound: a bellowing thunder...

Concussion: a fist that thumped the ground and tossed both of them down—hard.

The Alliance had given up on the bring-them-back-alive approach and was now set to destroy them, whatever the cost. The rep whose duty it was to direct Demos's forces had cracked, had let his ego snap and rule supreme over him. Davis and Leah had made a fool out of the searchers once too often; now, with the murder of the single-man copter pilot on his record, Davis was a dangerous fugitive against whom any means of capture or destruction was sanctioned by law.

The chemical flame died as swiftly as it had erupted, though some of the yil trees—tough and durable—near the center of the blast were still burning furiously.

Davis leaped over a twisted mass of metal, started to help Leah across it, before he realized it was the hulk of Proteus. The protection robot had been caught near the center of the grenade eruption and had been smashed open down the middle. The guardian was gone; the security blanket had been taken from him.

For a moment, he was paralyzed with fear, unable to cope. Then, slowly, as two other phosphorescent grenades erupted around them, barely missing killing them, he remembered that she was depending on him, that he had to move, that he had to go one more lap of this journey. He had thought he could not commit violence, and he had committed plenty, starting with that rat he had destroyed in the gas shelter. He had thought he could not do without the adulation of his fans; he had found he was wrong. He had thought he could not survive against other men more rugged than he, against an uncompromising Mother Nature—but he had. Thus far, anyway. In short, he had discovered an entirely new Stauffer Davis, opened up avenues within himself that he had not known existed. It was because of her, the slight girl with wings, and he must not let her down, must not violate the trust she had given him.

Many of the trees were aflame now.

The snow had melted in rivers of whirling water, and the earth was even muddy in some places.

"This way!" he shouted above the crackling and burning, above the sound of copter blades which overlaid the holocaust.

She took his hand, followed him down a narrow corridor of brush and trees which was not yet burning. As they passed through, a grenade struck behind, setting that corridor ablaze as well. They had made it out of the fiery trap without any time to spare.

But the Alliance pilots were apparently able to see them, for they shifted the area of attack and began lobbing chemical grenades to the left and the right. Walls of fire burst into crackling existence around them, and the corridor of safety between was quite narrow indeed. Far ahead, another aircraft began seeding the woodland floor with still more explosives. It seemed as if the okay had been given to destroy a few miles of woodland in order to destroy the prey.

Davis was forced to shield his eyes from the intense heat that made them water and impaired his vision. The world was suddenly a place of illusion and delusion, where firewalls looked only inches away one instant, then seemed to flicker in the distance the next. The snow melted, seeped into the thawing earth and formed mud that sucked at their boots as they tried desperately to negotiate their way down the closing corridor of unburned land. Leah was having trouble walking, for her slim legs had not been made with the sort of musculature necessary to combat the gluelike earth. He walked beside her, helping her, all but carrying her.

He wished he could stop and strip off his clothes, for he was perspiring heavily beneath them. His face, he thought, was receiving a third degree burn and was peeling and bubbling. He saw her face was red-tinted, too, and that rivulets of sweat coursed down her small, pixieish features.

The roar of the fire had become so great that the noise of the hovering copters was no longer audible. He was certain, though he refused to accept it, that they were about to die...

Then, as they came to the end of the pathway and found they were surrounded by fire on all sides, he saw the cliff through the flames, to their left. Beneath the veil of terror that had been drawn down over all his thoughts, his mind still functioned, perhaps more quickly and cleverly than ever, spurred on—as it was—by desperation. The cliff, somehow, represented a momentary salvation. He could not think why, except that it might offer shelter of a minimal nature where, now, they had none at all. He held her to him, tried to see the rocks more clearly, tried to pick a spot where they should strike for. But the shimmering waves of heat and the licking orange tongues made any detailed examination of the way ahead impossible.

Leah clutched at him, whirled, tried to push herself away. Her Alaskan coat had caught fire. Small, bluish flames danced along the bottom of it. He fought her attempt to stay away from him, carried her to the ground, and fell

on top of her, using his own body and clothing to smother the fledgling blaze. He tried to shout, in her ear, what he wanted to do, but the manic scream of the blaze was too great to overcome, and she could not make out what he said, even when his lips were pressed to her ear.

He got to his feet, drew her up, and grasped her, lifted her from the ground, against his hip, when he was certain she understood that she was not to fight him, no matter what he did. Then, forcing himself to use every ounce of energy within him, he burst forward into the fire and through the six-foot line of it, to the cliffside he had caught a glimpse of earlier. As they came out of the fire, he fell, rolling under the overhang of the rock where there was still some snow and a great deal of water puddled in shallow pools, dousing their clothes which had leaped into flame.

The recess under the overhang was about seven feet deep, and a small cavelet, tucked to one side, was wide enough to accommodate both of them and put another eight feet between them and the fire. There was still a great deal of heat, but not more than they could bear. Together, they checked themselves for wounds. Leah was only "sunburned" on the face and had a twisted ankle. He also had suffered facial burns of moderate severity but had picked up another souvenir of the encounter which could mean more trouble to their progress and escape than any burn ever could. In his thigh, on the outside, four inches above his right knee, he had collected a piece of scrap metal from the exploding casing of a chemical grenade. The sharp piece of steel was embedded deep in his flesh, and dark blood welled around it.

"We'll have to get it out," she said.

"How?"

"The medkit, the speedheal will—" She stopped speaking and looked suddenly horrified.

"Exactly," he said. "It was in the suitcase that got shot up."

"But you'll get blood poisoning!"

"How far to Tooth?" he asked.

"Half a day."

"Then there better be a fortress there, because otherwise I'm done. They should have some sort of medical facilities and stockpiles in such a place."

"But can you walk on it?"

"I'll have to, won't I?"

For the next half an hour, the government pilots lobbed fire spoors into the

turmoil of the forest until the inferno raged through such a howling madness that nothing could have survived its countless hot tongues. They were forced to strip off their coats and sweaters, even back in their cool, water-floored cavelet. Often, the air became so superheated that it was difficult to draw a satisfactory breath—though Davis was pleased that the air currents worked in such a way as to draw the smoke upwards, away from the trees, and pulled new air in, underneath. Otherwise, they would have been dead of smoke inhalation inside of minutes. The Alliance rep was taking no chance with his elusive prey.

Finally, when the soldiers ceased shelling the charred and smoking woodlands, when the fire began to abate, Davis decided it was time to move out. Though it was still quite hot, they put their coats on once more, for wearing the bulky garments was easier than carrying them. Outside, in the ashes and thin black skeletons of yil trees, the pall of smoke was so dense overhead that the sky was invisible, shielding them from the view of the police; even after they had left the burned sections and made their way into unmolested trees and brush, it offered them excellent cover against discovery.

Davis hardly felt the chunk of shrapnel in his thigh as they began their last long lap of the trek.

Then it began to itch.

Then burn.

In an hour, it felt as if it were cored with napalm and that the flesh was being burned to ashes from within by steady, small flames, as if the shell of his leg were hollow, without bones or meat to fill it. With each step, it buckled and bent under severe pain.

It bled more than it should. Most of that trouser leg was soaked through.

The flesh in the area immediately around the wound was swollen and a yellow-blue in color.

He felt feverish.

He favored it for the first three hours of the walk, and they stopped to rest periodically. Their progress was hampered, but the Alliance seemed to be certain that they had perished in the forest fire and that misassumption gained them all the time they needed.

Sometimes, sitting on a log or rock, resting the damaged limb, he got furious with his body, as if its ruined leg were its own doing. After coming through so much, he could not contend with the idea that his own inability to go on the last couple of miles would spell the end for them. But he soon realized that a hatred of himself and a disgust with his own weaknesses only depressed him and made it more difficult to go on. On the other hand, if he



turned his fury into hatred of the Alliance, a personal, intimate hatred of the little rep and of each and every soldier that had been after them, the anger gave him strength, roused him to the accomplishment of things he had not known possible. When the rage was most brilliant in his mind, he could even put weight on the wounded leg without feeling much pain, if only for a few steps.

And so they progressed, Leah adding her support when he stumbled, Davis's face flushed with fury at the men who had put them in these circumstances, had driven them to this insane flight, banished them from the company of "normal" people. In the writing of so many historical novels, he had become intimately acquainted with nearly every era of mankind's past. It always amazed him that taboos changed so radically from historical moment to historical moment and from one culture to another—even when those cultures might exist in countries whose lands were side by side, or even when they existed within the larger society of a single nation. It was one of the things he tried so hard to make his readers grasp. The structuring of taboos which have nothing to do with the health of a nation but merely interfere with another man's rights is a silly and useless practice. Why tell a man what he may wear or with whom he may make love and under what conditions? In a hundred years, you will be laughed at for your narrow-mindedness. He thought of all this as they walked, and he forced himself to explore the ideas in more detail than ever, in an attempt to relieve his mind of too much consideration of his pain.

Eventually, he came to understand something important about the men who constituted the Alliance, the men who held power over the masses. They had never discovered the concept of "us." Indeed, they had even rejected the concept of "me" in order to regress to one more barbaric level—the concept of "it." Each man in the Alliance was part of "it": the government, the great machine of the laws and the prisons and the councils. Each man was a cog inside the overall mechanism, without individuality outside of his operating perspective. This view of the world, this "it" concept was the most dangerous unconscious philosophy ever adopted by a large segment of humanity, for it allowed its adherents—the bureaucrats and soldiers and politicians—to commit the most atrocious acts of physical, emotional, and mental slaughter and abuse against their people that the human mind could conceive. A member of the Alliance government who murdered a "traitor" or other enemy of the state never actually thought of "me" as the responsible party. "It" was to blame, if anyone. The soldier who killed in the war, the general who gave him his orders to destroy, and the president whose policies initiated the combat to begin with—none of them were responsible (in their own minds) as individuals, for they had only been acting in the name of the government, as a small—or even a large—size hardly mattered; the excuse could always apply—cog in the mechanics of "it" And, in the last level, "it," the government, was protected as well, since the machine could always rely on the cliché that "the government gets its power from the people"—a ruse to get the people to vote for the same megalomaniacs the next time they went to the polls.

He was jolted out of one of these tangled reveries as they passed out of the forest and climbed up a brush-covered foothill at the base of one of the largest mountains he had ever seen, a gargantuan peak of rock whose form vaguely resembled a wisdom tooth. They had been walking and resting, walking and resting in an almost hypnotic cycle for nine hours, ever since they had left the burned woods. To stop and not sit to raise his leg broke the chain of events, if only a trifle, and called forth his attention.

"Tooth," she said, holding onto his arm, keeping him erect with her own tense little body. "If I understood my grandfather correctly, the entrance to the fortress is not far."

He nodded, sorry she had broken the trance into which he had settled so comfortably, for the pain was a great deal worse while he was fully aware of his surroundings.

"Come on," she said, pulling his arm.

His leg was very warm and an odd tingling sensation pierced it from foot to hip. When he looked down at it, he wished that he had not, for the sight was unsettling. The wound had been torn wider, and the shrapnel had worked its way partially back out. In the process, the severed blood vessel had been permitted more freedom to spurt, and it was jetting regular pulses of warm blood down over his trousers. With an effort, he looked around and saw, behind, that he had been leaving a fairly rich red trail for the last half a dozen steps. In the moonlight, though, the red looked black.

"Hurry!" Leah said.

"Bleeding... too fast," he said.

"A tourniquet," she suggested, trying to make him sit down on the snow.

"No time. Only a... medkit. Bleeding too fast. Wound's... too big. I'm sort of sleepy."

"Don't sleep," she said. "Fight it!"

Blackness rose out of his guts and surged through his entire body, velvety and smooth and pleasant to behold. He felt his blood pressure dropping as a leaden dizziness clutched him and spun him heavily about.

He screamed silently...

Silently...

Tooth Mountain stood so close—yet so far.

He shambled a few steps forward before he fell and struck the ground hard. The cold snow felt wonderful on the spurting wound, and he suddenly

felt sure he would be fine, just fine, with just a little snow in the wound where the blood was... He laid there, feeling good, drowsy, appreciating the cold snow as he slipped quietly, peacefully into death...



# *Chapter Eleven*

Not just silence: quieter than that.

Not just total blackness: darker.

Not just odorless, antiseptic, clean: much purer than any words.

It was an aching, senseless void, a pit without matter, a pit without nonmatter, without walls or ceiling or floor, without air or wind, without anything the senses could distinguish, a limitless eternal stretch of absolute nothingness...

... and then there was light.

At first, there was an almost intangible brightening of the nothingness. Then the indescribable blackness became pitch. Then just black. Then just dark. The light came by degrees, and in a millennium it was as bright as a moonlit night, though there were no features about him.

He became aware of sounds next.

Clickings...

Whirrings...

The sound of tapes spooling and unspooling...

All the noises of a complex and busy machine doing whatever it was its makers had created it to do. As he thought of the word "machines," the first concrete concept which had occurred to him in this slow awakening, other solid thoughts and questions arose in his mind.

Where was he? His mind danced over that question, aware that a man who had no idea where he was was either intoxicated or insane—or had been abducted by someone, perhaps under drugs. Yes, yes, all the clichés of the historical novel rushed back to him in bulk. But as he considered each of them and rejected them, he found there was no comfort in clichés. Where in the devil was he?

He could feel a chair beneath him. No, not exactly a chair, either. It was more like a plushly padded automatic couch which had now folded and changed position-elevation to get him into a sitting posture. The thing was so well padded, in fact, that it bordered on the uncomfortable at first, though he found himself rapidly adapting to it.

Why couldn't he open his eyes?

*Not yet*, a smooth voice-tape whispered into the auditory nerves of his head. The words were not heard so much as experienced, and he knew there was a tap directly to his brain.

*Where am I?* he thought-asked of the machine.

*Not yet.*

He was still, trying to perceive what else lay about him in this weird world of gray light as soft as mouse fur—and without any form whatsoever. He could feel a fabric restraining belt around his waist, similar straps holding down his hands at the sides of the couch. He wiggled one hand and discovered something in the feeling of it that terrified him like nothing he had ever feared before. It was as if he had willed the hand to move and had discovered it was not his but someone else's hand—but that it had obeyed him and he had been able to feel through it!

*Relax*, the voice-tape prompted.

He moved the fingers again. He rubbed them back and forth against each other. There was a smooth, quick sensation of flesh on flesh. The problem, the thing that terrified him again, was that it was *too* smooth and *too* quick. It felt much like the amplified, unreal tactile effects of a senso-theater film wherein everything was somewhat larger and better than life (not because the senso-theaters meant it to be, but because no one had ever been able to approximate true human sensations exactly enough—and patrons would pay more for overcompensation than for inadequacy).

He tried to speak.

He could not.

His face, straining in the normal expression to form the words he wanted to use, felt wrong. It felt like someone else's face.

He felt like screaming.

*Whose body am I in?* he asked the machine.

*Yours.*

*No!*

*Yours.*

*Please. Whose body am I in?*

*It is your body.*

*Tell me why—*

*Not yet.*

*When?*

*Wait.*

He tried to decipher the mystery of his whereabouts by inhaling and savoring the air. But it was antiseptic air, tangy with disinfectants, nothing more. A hospital, then?

*We will test now,* the voice said.

*What do you mean?*

*Speak.*

*I can't speak.*

*Speak.*

"Dammit, I can't speak!" he roared, then realized the words had been formed and thrust forth, given birth by vocal cords and tongue and lips and teeth. It seemed, almost, like a miracle.

*That is enough,* the voice-tape said.

"Where am I? What has been done to me?" He hissed it out in such a tense, shallow whisper that it almost seemed as if he had communicated the thought without using his new-found voice.

The voice...

"This isn't my voice," he said. The tone was too high, not at all the deep and manly baritone he was accustomed to hear issuing from his own throat.

*It is your voice.*

"No. I—"

*Wait. If it isn't your voice, who are you, and what should your voice sound like?*

He realized, with horror, that he not only didn't know who or what had him and where they or them were keeping him, but he was equally ignorant of his own identity. Meekly, he asked, "Who am I?"

*I will restore the majority of your memory banks shortly. The nerves to them had been momentarily disconnected. Patience. Wait.*

"But—"

*The tests come first. After the tests, you will know.*

He obliged its requests to move feet, hands, arms. It released his hands and legs of the straps, but only one at a time, so there was no possibility of him jumping and running. Which was unlikely, he thought, considering he was blind and nearly mindless in a world he didn't know. His olfactory nerves were tested with a long series of odors he often did not recognize—not because he couldn't smell them, but because they were not the spices commonly used by citizens of—Of what? He forgot.

*Now, a short sleep—the voice-tape began.*

"My memory!" he shouted.

But then there was sleep...

Yellow...

*What is the color?* he was asked.

"Yellow."

*This one?*

There was nothing before his eyes, in any direction, but shimmering blue the color of an Earth sky. He named the hue for the machine.

*This?*

"Purple."

*Is this second blue closer to the shade you have called purple than the first blue—this blue—you saw a moment ago?*

He went through the routine for five minutes, growing impatient. But he was afraid to speak for fear he would be punished by further sleep before he learned the answers to the questions that plagued him. When he was finished, the couch settled into a horizontal position, and dozens of instruments of a surgical nature began working about his head. He could feel the brush of them against his skin now and again, though he could not guess what they were doing and could feel no pain. Then, abruptly, he knew who he was and that he had, in the last moments before he had awakened here, been lying in the snow at the base of Tooth Mountain, dying. He had died. He distinctly remembered the passing from the sleep-darkness to that other shade of black, the energiless and eternal night that had been beyond the power of words to describe. He tried to sit up, was held down by the straps.

*Wait.*

He waited. He had a fairly good idea where he was now. There had been a



fortress after all. And Leah had gotten him into it. And if he had not died until she had him within the receival tray of a fullsize robo-doc there was a chance the machine had been able to hypo adrenalin into him to get his heart functioning, while it had fed him bottles of blood plasma from a needle.

Yet that did not explain some of the strange sensations that he had been through. He still felt as if he were Stauffer Davis—and someone else, as if he were not wholly himself.

There was sleep yet again.

And when he woke, he was sitting up, still strapped in the form-changing couch, looking straight into the eyes of a Demosian man, when there never should have been such a creature there. The Demosian men were nonexistent now, destroyed by the war and the sterilizing mustard gas. There were only women remaining, as Matron Salisbury had so pointedly assured him when he had tried to find out where Leah's husband was.

He opened his mouth to ask how the Demosian came to be there—and the mouth of the alien opened at the same moment. For the first time, Davis realized he was looking into a mirror placed directly opposite him and that the slight, handsome Demosian with the wings folded down the middle of his back was *him!*

The mirror rose into the ceiling, and Leah was standing behind it, on the platform of the surgical robot, looking worriedly down at him. As the straps let him go, she asked, "It was all right, what I did?"

He was dazed, unable to understand what had happened to him.

"You were dead. You were dead shortly after I found the entrance and dragged you back and inside. Half an hour after you were dead, I got you into the machine. I didn't think anything could be done then. But what brain cells had deteriorated, the machine rebuilt."

"I'm not a man any more," he said.

"You're a Demosian, yes. The genetic chambers were prepared to deliver a perfectly structure male Demosian for the implantation of your own brain tissue. That was the problem with the Artificial Wombs: they could turn out grown Demosians, male or female, but not with brains that could learn more than enough to understand the basics of even self-care. Morons. If the project couldn't solve the problem, they were prepared to transplant the brains of our own people—after they were killed by the Conquerors—into new shells, keep using the same warriors over and over. It was also possible to take the brain of a captured Conqueror, wash it clean, implant it in a Demosian form. The resultant hybrid was a... a zombie, a servant for menial tasks that would free good men to fight. If I was to save you, I had to make your body the body of a winged man."

"But the Demosian machine—your machine—spoke to me in English."

"It had to be programmed with the Alliance dominant tongues as well as Demosian languages, for it had to be able to communicate with a Conqueror prisoner in order to obtain information and to brainwash him."

"How long?"

"Three weeks."

He looked startled.

"It has been lonely," she said.

"No one... ?"

"The search has been given up. The fortress can tap their public communications, so I've followed it all in detail. We were killed, they have announced, in the firestorm."

He burst out laughing, and realized that she had been even tenser than he when she smiled uncertainly at him. He leaped up, grabbed her, hugged her to him. She no longer seemed quite so tiny, quite so elfin. But, through the perceptions of the Demosian body, she was a hundred times more alluring than she had seemed before. He realized that this was simply because the tactile, visual, auditory receptors of the Demosian body, the nerve clusters that gathered these sensations, were far more sensitive and refined than the like nerves of the grosser human form. But he also liked to think that she was more radiant, also, because they were now separated by fewer differences than ever, were joined by a likeness of flesh that would make physical and emotional intimacy so much deeper and more meaningful.

"You're not mad, then?" she asked.

"Of course not!"

"I'm glad. I've been worried all these days I've waited for the machine to finish its chores with you."

"Now," he said, feeling the joy of life bounding in him like the stimulating fingers of some booster drug, "we are not only free and unhunted, but we have the fortress with which to work and plan; we don't have to be barbarians, living without conveniences and without hope. There's so much to study and accomplish that it's hard to know where to start."

"How about going flying with me for beginners?" she asked.

It took him a moment to realize that she meant flying and was not using a euphemism for lovemaking. He stood, mouth open, and looked down to his now small feet, up his powerful but thin legs, at a body that had been

constructed for travel through the air. Carefully, he unfolded his great, blue wings behind him...



## Chapter Twelve

Davis sat in the richly padded maroon easy chair behind the ornate desk which seemed very large and blocky and comfortably solid before him but which was, by human standards, a mite too small to do business from. It had been a little more than two weeks now since he had awakened under the hand of the mechanical surgeon in the genetic chambers in the bottom floor of the subterranean fortress and had discovered that he no longer possessed the body of an Earthman, and still he continued to compare the sensations and the time-space judgments he made with those he would have made in the much different human shell he had been born with. More often than not, the Demosian body came out the winner in such comparisons, for it was more compact, more muscular, considering the fine tuning of what muscle it *did* possess, and quicker than the looming hulk of the old Stauffer Davis.

He found that, unlike a man of Earth, a Demosian moved in a fluid, catlike manner so natural and rhythmical that he was not aware of his body in any conscious plane. He never tripped over a seam in the floor. He never bent to pick something up and found his stomach in his way. He never cracked head or hips against doorways, never fumbled something he was attempting to pick up. He was one with his environment, as a human could never be, and met and coped with it on a subconscious level that freed his mind for almost continual deep thought on the things he had learned in these past several days.

He turned off the tapeviewer on the desk, leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes, letting his mind wander. The tape concerned the operation of the genetic wombs and the theories advanced to explain their inability to produce beings with serviceable brains inside their skulls. He still did not understand two-thirds of the technical language, but he was learning with the aid of sleep-teach machines that fed the data into his own brain at a hundred times the speed he could have learned it under normal classroom circumstances. The theory that most interested him was the one constructed by Dr. Mi'nella—who was now dead, slaughtered in the senseless Alliance takeover of Demos. Mi'nella believed that the problem with the mindlessness of the artificial men did not lie in the genetic engineering at all, but, instead, in the time-ratio chamber where the untouched fetus was put and—in ten days subjective time—aged twenty years objectively. Thus, Mi'nella argued, they were producing twenty-year-olds with the minds of newborn babies and the sensory equipment of the adult body—which was sexually complete—the most devastating blow to the confused, blank mind was shorting out the seeking brain of the infant, bringing insanity in the first few moments of life outside the time-ratio chamber. Mi'nella wanted to work out a retooling of the process on the main computer in Fortress Two as soon as possible and see if the bugs could be ironed out of the time-ratio chambers or whether it was worthwhile to produce infant Demosians who could not be ready for battle for at least a dozen years.

The war had ended without Mi'nella being given that chance.

But the theory and the—if even slight—possibility of getting the Artificial Wombs working on a practical level fascinated and cheered Davis. He had come to feel, after the first couple of days of celebration at their escape and his resurrection, that it would be criminal for them to spend the rest of their lives in pursuit of pleasure within the vast complex while all the facility of the Demosian culture, all the knowledge and expertise, was here at hand in an easy-to-use form. The library was vast; the sleep-teachers could make them experts in any field overnight. Or, at least, overmonth. The machines that performed the miracle chores from genetic juggling to maintenance were the type that either responded to verbal commands or to keyboard instructions typed out in native Demosian tongues (which Davis learned the first week under the sleep-teachers). It seemed to him that all of this could be put to some use, though he was not certain what. The thought had passed through his mind that the two of them might take some form of revenge upon the Alliance—not only for the misery they had been put through, but in retaliation for the destruction of the millions of winged men and women who had died in the genocidal conflict.

On a simpler basis, he realized that if he and Leah were to have children, to raise them as a guerilla army against the Alliance control, they would have to form the fetuses in the Artificial Wombs, working with the basic chemicals of creation—for Leah was, after all, sterile.

The door to the study opened, a thick slab of wood that hummed away on power runners as Leah entered bearing a box of spools. She had been doing research in the tape library, looking up those subjects he wished to know more about, and she was the sort of clever and selective research aide every writer dreams about, never bringing him anything esoteric unless it was in some way illuminative of the major topic—in which case, he guessed, it wasn't esoteric at all.

"Success, I see."

"A good bit of it. There are three other fortresses, just as I told you. It's all here. And this number two fortress you've been finding mention of, the one Mi'nella speaks about in conjunction with its computer, is the largest of the four. It makes this place look like a mole hole. There are 48 floors, each 450 feet long by 600 wide. The last 10 stories contain the main computer and an auxiliary node computer whose purpose is to extrapolate on scientific data discovered in the genetic engineering chambers and project possible research avenues a man might not think of."

"We could use that lovely machine."

"We can get to it," she said.

"You have the location?"

"It's 86 miles from here, at the northern tip of this range, the third major mountain from the end. The other two fortresses are both over twelve hundred miles from here. We're fortunate it isn't one of those."

"Eighty-six miles. Well, we know we can use the computer if the standard model we have here can't help us. That extrapolative node might very well be the turning point. But I want to learn everything here, first, before we move."

"It's getting dark," she said, holding out her hand.

It had become their custom to fly, together, when the last light of day was in the sky and the world was in that lovely stage that corresponded to half-undressed in a woman. He did not break that custom tonight, but joined her in the bubble of the lift that carried them smoothly toward the top of the mountain where a disguised observation nook had been built—which they used for a launching and landing platform.

That first night, when he had arisen from the couch of the mechanical surgeon, suffering from the emotional shock of finding himself in an alien body and knowing his own temporal shell was rotting in a grave, he had been unable to fly. He had spread the wings, done as she had told him to, but he could not lift himself, not even a foot. That had depressed him, on top of all else that had happened, and he had thought he would have to look forward to a future in which his body was perfectly capable of flight but his mind was too earthbound and hungup to allow it.

The next evening, she had persuaded him to go out again, after a great deal of urging and argument that Demosian children, after all, didn't fly from the moment of birth. Why, then, she wanted to know, did he expect to be any different? Sure, his was a grown Demosian body, but he was still a child in the sense that he had a great deal more to learn about the function of his new flesh. Reluctantly, feeling like a petulant child, he went with her.

It had been a clear night, with a pink-yellow sunset that spread questing fingers from the horizon to the middle of the sky.

He had grudgingly gone through the routine of "learning" how to fly again, positioning himself as she did, listening to what muscles should be used, trying to use them—meeting with failure again. It was the most frustrating experience of his life, especially since she could do it so easily and he could only stand there, grunting comically and flapping his membranous appendages like sheets on the clothesline during the hurricane. He had vowed to give it up forever after this session, but was determined to stick it out now that he was here. She had said half an hour, and he had five minutes to go—and then he had suddenly moved the wings correctly, in time, smoothly, catching a gust of wind under them, ballooning them, lifting off the observation deck. He had closed them swiftly, lest he should raise away from the landing area, thousands of feet above the ground, and find he could not repeat the performance.

But he had done it again and again until, at last, he took the last step, risked everything, and flapped off the side of the mountain, falling like a rock for a moment until his wings got air beneath them and he was soaring, gliding, a creature of the wind and sky as surely as Leah was.

Now, two weeks later, he still looked forward to flight as a child looked forward to the zoo. There was always something new to try, some stunt he had worked out in his head and had not, until now, had the guts to see if he could pull off. He wondered if he would ever grow weary of the sky and of his wings, decided that was about as likely as his ever getting tired of Leah—which was not very likely at all. Perhaps if he had been born with wings, he would have eventually come to take them for granted as an earthbound human comes to take his legs for granted after—for a brief few weeks—finding great joy in taking his first few steps as a babe. But being winged in middle-age, after a lifetime of walking the ground, negated any diminution in the wonder effect.

But none of this was the meat of the nut, the real reason why he found himself so happy and contented in this new form, why he had been able to recover, so swiftly, from the shock of losing his body. At first, he had been worried that he was not being honest about the horror he must certainly feel over losing the old Stauffer Davis husk; he was certain that he was suppressing the disgust and terror, and that his subconscious mind would accept them and let them fester. Someday, he would pay for not being honest with himself now, he thought. But, day by day, he came to understand that he *was* being honest when he said he was happier with his new body than his old one and that he wished he had died sooner and been resurrected as a Demosian years ago. And he came to see that, down deep, being freed of the old physical shell had freed him, more than ever, from his mother and father. He was no longer their child. They would not—if they were alive and came to Demos—even recognize him. He could walk among them and be unknown. The form, the mannerisms, the tic in his left cheek they had given him—all these things had been sloughed away, and only the essence had been left: the mind which he had faithfully scrubbed of their hatred years ago and which Leah had helped him to free in these past months on Demos. He would no longer have to look in the mirror and see the long, thin, patrician nose that reminded him, always, of his mother—or the square, heavy jaw that was distinctly his father's. Yes, this was the seed of the blooming joy: that he no longer had even the slightest ties to those people he loathed so much, to that twisted and hate-filled couple who had conceived him.

The bubble of the elevator came to rest, and Leah thumbed for the doors to open. The fake rock partitions slid back, and they walked out onto the observation niche near the top of Tooth Mountain. The forests and peaks of Demos spread out before them, majestic in the multicolored light of the dust-filtered sun.

Spreading his arms (and his wings behind them), Davis dashed to the edge of the niche, leaped into space, and barely managed to get air under the thin



membranes in time to avoid a collision with a long antigrav bus which was using its plates against the side of the mountain to negotiate high enough to give the passenger's inside a thrill. On the side of the vehicle was lettered PIKE'S WOLF HUNT TOUR. The men and women inside, dressed in hunter's camouflage and holding drinks, looked at him wide-eyed, as if he had materialized out of nowhere. He saw them look above, where Leah still stood on the niche, and he knew that their respite from the pursuit of the authorities had ended in one, short second when he had been too stupid to look before leaping.



## *Chapter Thirteen*

Davis stood by the request keyboard of the fortress computer and punched out every subject heading he could conceive of that might concern the existence of the other three fortresses. Spools of tape slid into the delivery slot in alarming number, and he dropped them swiftly into a sack he had brought for the purpose. When he could not think of anything which might contain critical data about the other hideouts, he started punching out headings dealing with the Artificial Wombs, hoping to have time to deny all of that to the Alliance as well.

"Here," Leah said, entering the room and dumping a pile of spools into the sack. "Those are the ones I got you this evening. They were still on the study desk."

"Thanks," he said. "Food?"

"All packed."

"Water?"

He punched out another topic; more spools slid into the tray.

"Got it," she confirmed.

"Two heat blankets?"

"Yes, and electric torches. And, though Fortress Two might very well have weapons, we'll need some while we're getting from here to there. I packed four guns."

"Damn!" he snapped, pounding a fist into the keyboard.

"What is it?"

"I don't see how we're going to have time to get all the pertinent data out of the library. And even if we do, we'll not be able to take it all with us. And it's burn-proof film. I could cut it up—and they'd put it back together."

"What about acid?" she asked. "There should be a great many kinds in the labs, don't you think? One of them ought to destroy the stuff."

He gave her a mock kiss. "Great!" He fished in the sack, handed her some spools. "You go down and find something that works. I'll stay here and push for as many topics as I can come up with and join you when I think I've got everything."

She took the spools and raced through the door, into the elevator across

the hall and down to the lower reaches.

For some reason, as Davis stood there punching out subjects, he felt like the legendary little Dutch boy at the wall of the dike, trying to plug up the leak with a finger. Instead of water spilling out across his shoes, there were data films, dozens of them. At last, when he could not conjure up another title on any pertinent subject, he filled the sack with the spools. He was well enough acquainted with the library to know there were a few thousand other topics covered, but he had no more time to worry about those.

When he reached the first lab floor and got off, Leah almost collided with him. "What is it?" he asked.

"The acid idea is out. Unless you've boned up on your chemical formulas recently."

"Huh?"

"They don't have stuff sitting around in bottles. It looks like each lab table has a dispenser that connects to a central chemical depository. It looks like you dial out the formula for what you want. But I don't know any formulas."

"Try something random."

"I did. Four times. Nothing happened."

His thoughts were flitting through his mind too fast for him to fully comprehend any one of them. And before he could manage to slow them down to a reasonable speed, the warning lights and sirens went on all over the complex. Someone had breached the observation niche's false rock door. The Alliance men were now in the fortress.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Before they stop the lifts!" He pulled her backwards, into the bubble car, and punched for the basement. The lift dropped so suddenly their stomachs flipped over, and a moment later the doors opened on the last level of the installation.

"There's the sled," she said, pointing to the grav-plated snow vehicle sitting along the far wall. It was light, with a large, flat surface to sit on, no comfortable seat, only belts to hold the passengers on the hard metal it was constructed from. It had been meant for short distance travel in stormy weather, not for 86-mile rides. But it was going to have to do.

There were two rucksacks strapped on the luggage rail, lights and guns strapped to the hand rail on the other side to give balance. It looked sturdy enough, as if it could take a good bit of knocking around, and it was no doubt fast. But he didn't relish getting on it and opening up its drive motor to see what it could do.

They slipped into the heavy coats, buttoned them up, pulled the hoods in place, and worked thick gloves on. Davis felt a strange itching in the small of his back from having his wings covered. It seemed unnatural, and he wished he could shed the coat. But this was going to be a long haul. It might be 86 miles to Fortress Two as the Demosian flew. But they were going to have to stay out of the sky, and they were sure to find a ground route was a hell of a great deal longer.

The lift closed its doors and went up, speeding to bring the men of the Alliance down on them.

"Here are the controls," Leah said, quickly identifying each of the pedals and each of the knobs on the semicircular steering wheel. This is for opening the concealed door to let us out. "This is for closing it once we've gone through."

"Get on," he said.

They sat on the flat surface of the sled, strapped themselves down. Leah grabbed him around the waist, laid her face against his shoulder so she could see just a little of what was ahead. "Go," she said.

The door in the rock wall slid open.

He lifted the sled, shot it forward, through the raised stone, and into the snowy world outside. He pressed to close it the instant they had gone through, and then they were separated, forever, from the complex, alone in the dark and the wind.

Above, near the peak, Alliance copters chopped the air apart, lowering men to the observation deck where the stronghold had been breached. He wondered if they knew that the two winged people they saw were the same they had certified dead several weeks earlier—back in the times when only one of them could fly. According to Leah, who had monitored the news out of the port city, both of their pictures had been flashed on every communications media on the planet, complete with an in-depth report on what happens to good citizens who give in to evil and perverted lusts and break the law of the Alliance and the Supremacy of Man party. And though his own features did not even remotely resemble those the television audience had glimpsed, she looked the same. And no one, he was certain, could ever forget her face having seen it only once. They probably knew, well enough, that the girl was Leah. And if they didn't suspect his identity, they'd know for sure when they found the Artificial Wombs and deduced their purpose.

He concentrated on steering the light, fast craft along the top of the snow. Its grav field was so strong that the thing could support itself on the crust without stirring a breath of air in passage. The only noise it made in the Demosian night was a soft, contented purring, like a cat who had been on prowl and has found what it's been looking for.

There were no hardships this time, and no moments when either of them thought they had seen their last breath of air drawn—except once, when a bull moose with spiderweb antlers (which were really antennae) loped across their path, directly in front of them. They had missed it by inches, and it had charged after them, its gossamer antlers rippling and swaying above its head; but it had been no match for the sled.

They reached the second fortress in five hours, never driving faster than fifty nor slower than thirty, weaving in and out of trees, hugging the sides of valleys and bucking crazily up over the ruggedest drifts they had ever seen. It was well before dawn that they found the mountain which housed their sanctuary and achieved the door in its base that led to a sled berth like the one they had departed from earlier in the night. It was structured much the same as the first stronghold, though it was far larger. When they had looked at only a small bit of it, they agreed that a full reconnaissance could wait until morning.

"One thing," he said, wearily, as they tumbled into bed.

"What's that?" she asked, sounding even sleepier than he.

"We can't stay here more than another day or two."

She sat up. "Why not?"

"Because, love, even though I tried to pull every trace of the other three fortresses from the library of the first, there is bound to be a reference hidden in one of the thousands of other spools of data. And you can be damn sure they're going to go over that library with a microscope—especially when they discover we've seen fit to deplete it of large sections of knowledge. They'll know, at once, that there is another place like the first, and they'll waste nothing to find it. It won't take them long at all. They can even use Fortress One's computer to scan Fortress One's library and save themselves a few thousand man hours."

"But what can we do?"

"Only one thing," he said. He yawned and rolled over.

"Wait just a damn minute!" she exploded, dragging him onto his back again. "What's the one thing?"

"It'll take a long time to explain. And it's going to require a very emotional and important decision on your part. Wait until you feel better, wait until you're rested."

"Now," she persisted.

He shrugged, sat up, scratched his head. "Now, eh? Well, you might not like this. You may even hate me for suggesting it. It's not going to be pretty,

and we can't kid ourselves that it will be an easy thing to do. You still want to hear, now?"

"Go on," she said.

He did...





## *Chapter Fourteen*

The general sat in the passenger seat of his private helicopter as the pilot brought it around Needlepoint, the mountain which contained Fortress Two. In his lap was a book about ancient mythology, a subject he explored with great interest whenever the duties of his command would permit. He fingered the leather-bound volume now as he watched troop copters settling into position as they had been commanded. One touched down at the base of Needlepoint, blocking exit from the concealed sled door. A blunder like that which had been perpetrated at the first stronghold would not occur here. Two other copters jockeyed for position near the observation deck near the top of the mountain, that cunningly crafted platform of stone that seemed such a natural part of the land.

The general picked up the microphone. "Go in, Explosives."

A team of three blue-suited Alliance soldiers jumped from the cargo bay side door of one of the copters, three feet to the ledge below. Two cases of tools were handed down, and in a moment, the trio was at work.

The general thought, sitting there above the night and watching the small drama being played out in the light of the copter lamps, that he was much like a god himself. The notion pleased him considerably. He picked up the mike and said, to the copter that had been carrying the explosives team, "Tell them to hurry it up!"

The three men, a moment later, responded to the order repeated to them by an unseen hand in the copter's cargo bay and stepped up the pace of their activities considerably. Within two minutes, they stepped back from the seemingly natural rock wall before them, looked at their watches, tensed a second before the explosion echoed and the stone flew inwards, away from them, and made an entrance into Fortress Two.

The general was about to issue orders to hold off until he could be landed to lead the party when a heavily armored protection robot, apparently part of the fortress's defense chain, opened fire through the blasted door.

The three men of the explosives team went down, rolled in agony, and fell from the ledge down the seven thousand feet to the first promontory that caught them with brutal finality.

The windowglass on the first cargo copter shattered, and the pilot inside screamed so loudly that the general could even hear him through his own pilot's headphones. The copter spiraled downward, bounced away from the mountain, burst into flame, and rolled through the trees and the snow, setting a few branches afire.

There was no need to order a pullback. Everyone had done that the

moment the three men had collected the first blast of fire.

"Fire a grenade in there!" the general ordered the pilot of the other copter. His own craft had minimal weaponry, nothing heavy enough for the task at hand.

The first pilot obliged.

A moment later, the mouth of the entrance flared into brilliance, and the protection robot there shattered under the heat and concussion. With nothing but rock and steel to feed on, the fire died.

"Advance infantry," the general ordered.

Another copter hovering rather far out from the mountain sped toward the deck. Ten minutes later, a group of twenty Alliance soldiers dressed in power suits stood before the blackened entrance to Fortress Two.

"Take it," the general said.

They went in.

The captain of the advance infantry followed behind his two experts in power suit maneuvers. He was amazed, as he always was in action, at the docility of men, the manner in which they so readily agreed to rush forward into what might be certain death. He shook his head inside his thickly armored helmet and grinned. Dumb, green kids, even if they were thirty years old and older.

To the right, a battery of armor-piercing guns sprang to life, and one of the power suit experts went down with half a dozen steel spines stabbed through his body despite the toughness of his metal shell. The second man was faster: he turned and lobbed an implosion missile into the offending weaponry, wiping it out of existence before it could realign its sights on him or anyone else.

"Three, forward!" the captain bellowed.

And Three marched up to take the place of the man who had just been killed.

The captain marveled at the rhythm of it. The Alliance knew how to train its men.

Make them think of themselves as cogs, he mused. That's what keeps them in line. If they start to think or have opinions, boot the bastards out of the service!

"First floor secured," he radioed back to the general a few minutes later. "One loss."

The general wondered who had been taken out, whether it was anyone he might know. He doubted it. It was best to ignore the enlisted men, for they were nothing more than cogs in the great works of the army. The captain was a nice enough chap—but obviously an idiot. Often, the general marveled at the humility with which people like the captain obeyed their orders even when they knew death was likely. Brainless, the lot of them.

He debarked from his private copter and entered Fortress Two, prowled the battle-scarred first level while he waited for news that another floor had been cleared and designated peaceful.

He carried the book of mythology in his hand.

He stopped over the body of the dead, power-suited soldier who had been speared by the antiarmor unit.

He kicked the helmet until the man's face appeared.

It wasn't anyone he knew.

He wondered what he would have done if it had been someone he recognized.

Nothing.

A man had to be an idiot to agree to a position in the advance infantry.

And how could you feel sorry about the death of an idiot?

The Demosians, the captain learned, had not expected their fortresses to be found and breached, for they had not used great imagination in the placement of the defense weapons. Much of it was drearily predictable. Of course, there was that incident on the eighteenth level down when the gun implantations had been—for the first time—in the ceilings, and four men had been brought down before everyone had gotten back out of firing range. But that had, thus far, been the only disaster.

Even so, he had stationed himself to the side of the main body of men, as well as behind the front pair of power suits.

He looked back the line, to see that the rear guard was keeping in step and at ready. He couldn't understand what sort of man would take a rear guard position, just as he couldn't understand what kind of man would willingly lead the rest of them, placing his body in the path of the first shots fired. Both positions were open to general disaster.

The privates in the rear guard watched the captain with interest as the advance infantry squad moved down through Fortress Two. If they hadn't been in armor, they would have been trading whispered jokes about him.

After all, what sort of man refuses to walk midst the protection of other bodies when the bullets are flying?

The general was standing by the stairwell, waiting to go down when he got the word; reading a passage of his book, a paragraph from a chapter on Mars, the god of war. There was a drawing of the supernatural man-entity on the facing page. The general liked the look of the jaw, the almost mad gleam in the eye which he interpreted as the sign of a clever man.

Mars.

Yes, he was Mars, at least in a way. He was the top-ranking military official of an entire world. He could bring destruction or peace, as he so chose. He was chuckling over the story of a mythological prank Mars was supposed to have played on his fellow gods when the floor bucked, buckled, sent him sprawling, and a deafening roar swept out of the corridors below and through the other floors of the fortress, out into the Demosian night.

He grabbed his lapel communications mike. "What the devil's going on down there?"

There was no answer.

"Has the floor been secured?" he asked.

"Sir?" a thin voice asked from the other end.

"Who am I speaking to?" the general demanded.

"Rear Guard Position Three," the private said.

"Where's your captain?"

"Dead, sir."

"Dead?"

"We reached the end of the Demosian defense system. Explosives in the floor, triggered to a certain weight stress of pedestrians. Only five of us left, and two of those are badly in need of treatment, General. Sir."

"You're sure of the defense system? That was the last of it?"

"It had to be, sir. They couldn't risk any explosions like that further down, for fear of burying themselves. It had the feel of the last obstacle. They would probably defend with handguns from now on."

"Be prepared to escort me to the last chambers, Private. You and the other two men still capable of fighting."

"Yes, sir."

"They're in there, sir," the private said, coming into the corridor from the last chamber in the fortress. "With the genetic engineering equipment."

"Well, bring them along," the general said.

"They're rather—Well, there just isn't much to bring, sir."

The general frowned, closed the mythology book. "Eh?"

"They killed themselves. Set fire to the room, then shot themselves in the heads with two high-powered pistols. It's messy."

The general blanched. "You're sure it's them?"

"Absolutely. A winged girl and boy." He paused, then: "There's enough of one side of her face left to tell she was the pretty one we were after."

The general walked back down the hallway without visually confirming the private's report. He signaled his copter pilot with his lapel mike.

"Sir?"

"Patch me through to the representative."

"Yes, sir."

He leaned against the wall, reading about Zeus. It would be nice to be all powerful, to be more than a general (though that was nice). It would be delightful to pull strings and see nations jump instead of just a squadron or two of men. He closed the book and pondered a thought that had been cropping up in his mind more and more: why not run for a political office. Now there was the Demos rep, a former military man. Now he was in a position of power where... No. No, that was a bad thought. A rep's job wasn't worth it. You were just a cog in a wheel, if you were a rep, mouthing the orders of those above you, never your own man. No, the only place for individuals was here, as army officers.

"The rep, sir," the pilot said, interrupting his line of thought.

"General?"

"They're dead."

"You're certain of that. Once before you said they couldn't have survived  
—"

"I've got the bodies. Or what's left of them. Set the room on fire and then shot themselves through the head."

"Really? Did they really do that? Both things?"

"Yes," the general said.

"They had four days," the rep mused. "Four days before we located Fortress Two. They must have known we were coming. I wonder why they didn't use the time to get out of there?"

"Maybe they were tired of running. They just cooperated for a change."

"Yes," the rep said. "A man of Stauffer Davis's past would surely, eventually, see the madness of fighting us. Cooperation. That's exactly what it was, General. Good night."

The general said goodnight, switched off his lapel mike, opened his book and began waiting for the elevator which was working now that the technicians had repaired the sabotage to it.

Zeus. Yes, it would be marvelous. But how did you get to the top, an individualist and all? Could it be done. He read on while the lift descended to gather him up.

As the last of the copters lifted away from the ruined fortress and turned into the blackness toward homebase, two birds nestled together in the branches of a large tree halfway down the side of Needlepoint, looking up into the underbellies of the brutish troop carriers. They were as large as a six-year-old child, each, and covered by thick, downish feathers the color of yil tree leaves, yellow and lovely. Their faces were incredibly soft and gentle. On the end of each long wing, a rudimentary hand with four fingers and two thumbs was concealed in a pocket which feathers crossed over.

"Are they really gone?" she asked.

"They won't be back. Even if they suspect some trick, they won't know what they're looking for."

"How do you feel?"

"Still some shock," he said. "We should have had more time, before they came, to get used to ourselves, to what we've made of ourselves. But now we have years for that."

She was silent a while. Then: "Can we really have others like us?"

"In two days I learned every single piece of data and procedure having to do with the Artificial Wombs. I took two more days to structure these bodies because I wanted to be careful, sure—when I could have made them in hours. We can have children. They will be whole and healthy, children like us, birdmen. They'll be intelligent. Your people had gone further than they

realized in conquering the secrets of the genes. If they had not been so set onto the single track of creating soldiers, they could have done marvelous things. They might even had come up with a plan like this to save themselves from the last ravages of the battle with the Alliance."

"How long will it take? For babies?"

"I think—five months. You'll have them naturally, not through eggs, of course."

"When?" she asked.

"Now?" he asked.

It would be perfect to conceive their first child on this night, the first night of their residence in the new bodies, the night the Alliance thought them dead and forgotten.

"It's going to seem silly—the mechanics of lovemaking," she said, a touch of embarrassment in her voice.

"No, no!" he said. "You're beautiful. And your children will be too."

Tonight, the first child, the first of the secret, unseen, unsuspected warriors conceived in the dark of the woods, the warriors that would one day reclaim the land of their forefathers, reclaim Demos for people of the air... Tonight, love and conception and an effort to overcome awkwardness at not being human. Tonight, celebration. Tomorrow: going to come the revolution...